

Chapter 1

Dodd's Discovery

Only two young explorers stand in the way of the mad Bram's horrible revenge—the releasing of his trillions of man-sized beetles upon an utterly defenseless world.

Out of the south the biplane came winging back toward the camp, a black speck against the dazzling white of the vast ice-fields that extended unbroken to the horizon on every side.

It came out of the south, and yet, a hundred miles further back along the course on which it flew, it could not have proceeded in any direction except northward. For a hundred miles south lay the south pole, the goal toward which the Travers Expeditions had been pressing for the better part of that year.

Not that they could not have reached it sooner. As a matter of fact, the pole had been crossed and re-crossed, according to the estimate of Tommy Travers,

aviator, and nephew of the old millionaire who stood fairy uncle to the expedition. But one of the things that was being sought was the exact site of the pole. Not within a couple of miles or so, but within the fraction of an inch.

It had something to do with Einstein, and something to do with terrestrial magnetism, and the variations of the south magnetic pole, and the reason therefore, and something to do with parallaxes and the precession of the equinoxes and other things, this search for the pole's exact location. But all that was principally the affair of the astronomer of the party. Tommy Travers, who was now evidently on his way back, didn't give a whoop for Einstein, or any of the rest of the stuff. He had been enjoying himself after his fashion during a year of frostbites and hard rations, and he was beginning to anticipate the delights of the return to Broadway.

Captain Storm, in charge of the expedition, together with the five others of the advance camp, watched the plane maneuver up to the tents. She came down neatly on the smooth snow, skidded on her runners

like an expert skater, and came to a stop almost immediately in front of the marquee.

Tommy Travers leaped out of the enclosed cockpit, which, shut off by glass from the cabin, was something like the front seat of a limousine.

"Well, Captain, we followed that break for a hundred miles, and there's no ground cleft, as you expected," he said. "But Jim Dodd and I picked up something, and Jim seems to have gone crazy."

Through the windows of the cabin, Jim Dodd, the young archaeologist of the party, could be seen apparently wrestling with something that looked like a suit of armor. By the time Captain Storm, Jimmy, and the other members of the party had reached the cabin door, Dodd had got it open and flung himself out backward, still hugging what he had found, and maneuvering so that he managed to fall on his back and sustain its weight.

"Say, what the—what—what's that?" gasped Storm.

Even the least scientific minded of the party gasped in amazement at what Dodd had. It resembled nothing so much as an enormous beetle. As a matter of fact, it was an insect, for it had the three sections that characterize this class, but it was merely the shell of one. Between four and five feet in height, when Dodd stood it on end, it could now be seen to consist of the hard exterior substance of some huge, unknown coleopter.

This substance, which was fully three inches thick

over the thorax, looked as hard as plate armor.

"What is it?" gasped Storm again.

Tommy Travers made answer, for James Dodd was evidently incapable of speech, more from emotion than from the force with which he had landed backward in the snow.

"We found it at the pole, Captain," he said. "At least, pretty near where the pole ought to be. We ran into a current of warm air or something. The snow had melted in places, and there were patches of bare rock. This thing was lying in a hollow among them."

"If I didn't see it before my eyes, I'd think you crazy, Tommy," said Storm with some asperity. "What is it, a crab?"

"Crab be damned!" shouted Jim Dodd, suddenly recovering his faculties. "My God, Captain Storm, don't you know the difference between an insect and a crustacean? This is a fossil beetle. Don't you see the distinguishing mark of the coleoptera, those two

elytra, or wing-covers, which meet in the median dorsal line? A beetle, but with the shell of a crustacean instead of mere chitin. That's what led you astray, I expect. God, what a tale we'll have to tell when we get back to New York! We'll drop everything else, and spend years, if need be, looking for other specimens."

"Like fun you will!" shouted Higby, the astronomer of the party. "Lemme tell you right here, Dodd, nobody outside the Museum of Natural History is going to care a damn about your old fossils. What we're going to do is to march straight to the true pole, and spend a year taking observations and parallaxes. If Einstein's brochure, in which he links up gravitation with magnetism, is correct—"

"Fossil beetles!" Jim Dodd burst out, ignoring the astronomer. "That means that in the Tertiary Era, probably, there existed forms of life in the antarctic continent that have never been found elsewhere. Imagine a world in which the insect reached a size proportionate to the great saurians, Captain Storm! I'll wager poor Bram discovered this. That's why he

stayed behind when the Greystoke Expedition came within a hundred miles of the pole. I'll wager he's left a cairn somewhere with full details inside it. We've got to find it. We—"

But Jim Dodd, suddenly realizing that the rest of the party could hardly be said to share his enthusiasm in any marked degree, broke off and looked sulky.

"You say you found this thing pretty nearly upon the site of the true pole?" Captain Storm asked Tommy.

"Within five miles, I'd say, Captain. The fog was so bad that we couldn't get our directions very well."

"Well, then, there's going to be no difficulty," answered Storm. "If this fair weather lasts, we'll be at the pole in another week, and we'll start making our permanent camp. Plenty of opportunity for all you gentlemen. As for me, I'm merely a sailor, and I'm trying to be impartial.

"And please remember, gentlemen, that we're well into March now, and likely to have the first storms of

autumn on us any day. So let's drop the argument and remember that we've got to pull together!"

Tommy Travers was the only skilled aviator of the expedition, which had brought two planes with it. It was a queer friendship that had sprung up between him and Jim Dodd. Tommy, the blasé ex-Harvard man, who was known along Broadway, and had never been able to settle down, seemed as different as possible from the spectacled, scholarly Dodd, ten years his senior, red-haired, irascible, and living, as Tommy put it, in the Age of Old Red Sandstone, instead of in the year 1930 A. D.

It was generally known—though the story had been officially denied—that there had been trouble in the Greystoke Expedition of three years before. Captain Greystoke had taken the brilliant, erratic Bram, of the Carnegie Archaeological Institute, with him, and Bram's history was a long record of trouble.

It was Bram who had exploded the faked neolithic finds at Mannheim, thereby earning the undying enmity of certain European savants, but brilliantly demolishing them when he smashed the so-called Mannheim stone pitcher (valued at a hundred

thousand dollars) with a pocket-axe, and caustically inquired whether neolithic man used babbit metal rivets to fasten on his jug handles.

Bram's brilliant work in the investigation of the origin of the negrito Asiatic races had been awarded one of the Nobel prizes, and Bram had declined it in an insulting letter because he disapproved of the year's prize award for literature.

He had been a storm center for years, embittered by long opposition, when he joined the Greystoke Expedition for the purpose of investigating the marine fauna of the antarctic continent.

And it was known that his presence had nearly brought the Greystoke Expedition to the point of civil war. Rumor said he had been deliberately abandoned. His enemies hoped he had. The facts seemed to be, however, that in an outburst of temper he had walked out of camp in a furious snowstorm and perished. For days his body had been sought in vain.

Jimmy Dodd had run foul of Bram some years before,

when Bram had published a criticism of one of Dodd's addresses dealing with fossil monotremes, or egg-laying mammals. In his inimitable way, Bram had suggested that the problem which came first, the egg or the chicken, was now seen to be linked up with the Darwinian theory, and solved in the person of Dodd.

Nevertheless, Jimmy Dodd entertained a devoted admiration for the memory of the dead scientist. He believed that Bram must have left records of inestimable importance in a cairn before he died. He wanted to find that cairn.

And he knew, what a number of Bram's enemies knew, that the dead scientist had been a morphine addict. He believed that he had wandered out into the snow under the influence of the drug.

Dodd, who shared a tent with Tommy, had raved the greater part of the night about the find.

"Well, but see here, Jimmy, suppose these beetles did inhabit the antarctic continent a few million years ago, why get excited?" Tommy had asked.

"Excited?" bellowed Dodd. "It opens one of the biggest problems that science has to face. Why haven't they survived into historic times? Why didn't they cross into Australia, like the opossum, by the land bridge then existent between that continent and South America? Beetles five feet in length, and practically invulnerable! What killed them off? Why didn't they win the supremacy over man?"

Jimmy Dodd had muttered till he went to sleep, and he had muttered worse in his dreams. Tommy was glad that Captain Storm had given them permission to return to the same spot next morning and look for further fossils, though his own interest in them was of the slightest.

The dogs were being harnessed next morning when the two men hopped into the plane. The thermometer was unusually high for the season, for in the south polar regions the short summer is usually at an end by March. Tommy was sweating in his furs in a temperature well above the freezing point. The snow was crusted hard, the sky overcast with clouds, and a wind was blowing hard out of the south, and

increasing in velocity hourly.

"A bad day for starting," said Captain Storm. "Looks like one of the autumn storms was blowing up. If I were you, I'd watch the weather, Tommy."

Tommy glanced at Dodd, who was huddled in the rear cockpit, fuming at the delay, and grinned whimsically. "I guess I can handle her, Captain," he answered. "It's only an hour's flight to where he found that fossil."

"Just as you please," said Storm curtly. He knew that Tommy's judgment as a pilot could always be relied upon. "You'll find us here when you return," he added. "I've counter-manded the order to march. I don't like the look of the weather at all."

Tommy grinned again and pressed the starter. The engine caught and warmed up. One of the men kicked away the blocks of ice that had been placed under the skids to serve as chocks. The plane taxied over the crusted snow, and took off into the south.

The camp was situated in a hollow among the ice-mountains that rose to a height of two or three thousand feet all around. Tommy had not dreamed how strongly the gale was blowing until he was over the top of them. Then he realized that he was facing a tougher proposition than he had calculated on. The storm struck the biplane with full force.

A snowstorm was driving up rapidly, blackening the sky. The sun, which only appeared for a brief interval every day, was practically touching the horizon as it rose to make its minute arc in the sky. A star was visible through a rift in the clouds overhead, and the pale daylight in which they had started had already become twilight.

Tommy was tempted to turn back, but it was only a hundred miles, and Jimmy Dodd would give him no peace if he did so. So he put the plane's nose resolutely into the wind, watching his speed indicator drop from a hundred miles per hour to eighty, sixty, forty—less.

The storm was beating up furiously. Of a sudden the clouds broke into a deluge of whirling snow.

In a moment the windshield was a frozen, opaque mass. Tommy opened it, and peered out into the biting air. He could see nothing.... The plane, caught in the fearful cross-currents that swirl about the southern roof of the world, was fluttering like a leaf in the wind. The altimeter was dropping dangerously.

Tommy opened the throttle to the limit, zooming, and, like a spurred horse, the biplane shot forward and upward. She touched five thousand, six, seven—and that, for her, was ceiling under those conditions, for a sudden tremendous shock of wind, coming in a fierce cross-current, swung her round, tossed her to and fro in the enveloping white cloud. And Tommy knew that he had the fight of his life upon his hands.

The compasses, which required considerable daily adjusting to be of use so near to the pole, had now gone out of use altogether. The air speed indicator had apparently gone west, for it was oscillating between zero and twenty. The turn and bank indicator

was performing a kind of tango round the dial. Even the eight-day clock had ceased to function, but that might have been due to the fact that Tommy had neglected to wind it. And the oil pressure gauge presented a still more startling sight, for a glance showed that either there was a leak or else the oil had frozen.

Tommy looked around at Dodd and pointed downward. Dodd responded with a vicious forward wave of his hand.

Tommy shook his head, and Dodd started forward along the cabin, apparently with the intention of committing assault and battery upon him. Instead, the archaeologist collapsed upon the floor as the plane spun completely around under the impact of a blast that was like a giant's slap.

The plane was no longer controllable. True, she responded in some sort to the controls, but all Tommy was able to do was to keep her from going into a crazy sideslip or nose dive as he fought with the elements. And those elements were like a devil

unchained. One moment he was dropping like a plummet, the next he was shooting up like a rocket as a vertical blast of air caught the plane and tossed her like a cork into the invisible heavens. Then she was revolving, as if in a maelstrom, and by degrees this rotary movement began to predominate.

Round and round went the plane, in circles that gradually narrowed, and it was all Tommy could do to swing the stick so as to keep her from skidding or sideslipping. And as he worked desperately at his task Tommy began to realize something that made him wonder if he was not dreaming.

The snow was no longer snow, but rain—mist, rather, warm mist that had already cleared the windshield and covered it with tiny drops.

And that white, opaque world into which he was looking was no longer snow but fog—the densest fog that Tommy had ever encountered.

Fog like white wool, drifting past him in fleecy flakes that looked as if they had solid substance. Warm fog

that was like balm upon his frozen skin, but of a warmth that was impossible within a few miles of the frozen pole.

Then there came a momentary break in it, and Tommy looked down and uttered a cry of fear. Fear, because he knew that he must be dreaming.

Not more than a thousand feet beneath him he saw patches of snow, and patches of—green grass, the brightest and most verdant green that he had ever seen in his life.

He turned round at a touch on his shoulder. Dodd was leaning over him, one hand pointing menacingly upward and onward.

"You fool," Tommy bellowed in his ear, "d'you think the south pole lies over there? It's here! Yeah, don't you get it, Jimmy? Look down! This valley—God, Jimmy, the south pole's a hole in the ground!"

And as he spoke he remembered vaguely some crank who had once insisted that the two poles were hollow

because—what was the fellow's reasoning? Tommy could not remember it.

But there was no longer any doubt but that they were dropping into a hole. Not more than a mile around, which explained why neither Scott nor Amundsen had found it when they approximated to the site of the pole. A hole—a warm hole, up which a current of warm air was rushing, forming the white mist that now gradually thinned as the plane descended. The plateau with its covering of eternal snows loomed in a white circle high overhead. Underneath was green grass now—grass and trees!

The fog was nearly gone. The plane responded to the controls again. Tommy pushed the stick forward and came round in a tighter circle.

And then something happened that he had not in the least expected. One moment he seemed to be traveling in a complete calm, a sort of clear funnel with a ring of swirling fog outside it—the next he was dropping into a void!

There was no air resistance—there seemed hardly any air, for he felt a choking in his throat, and a tearing at his lungs as he strove to breathe. He heard a strangled cry from Dodd, and saw that he was clutching with both hands at his throat, and his face was turning purple.

The controls went limp in Tommy's hands. The plane, gyrating more slowly, suddenly nosed down, hung for a moment in that void, and then plunged toward the green earth, two hundred feet below, with appalling swiftness.

Tommy realized that a crash was inevitable. He threw his goggles up over his forehead, turned and waved to Dodd in ironic farewell. He saw the earth rush up at him—then came the shattering crash, and then oblivion!

Chapter 2: Beetles and Humans

How long he had remained unconscious, Tommy had no means of determining. Of a sudden he found himself lying on the ground beside the shattered plane, with his eyes wide open.

He stared at it, and stared about him, without understanding where he was, or what had happened to him. His first idea was that he had crashed on the golf links near Mitchell Field, Long Island, for all about him were stretches of verdant grass and small shrubby plants. Then, when he remembered the expedition, he was convinced that he had been dreaming.

What brought him to a saner view was the discovery that he was enveloped in furs which were insufferably hot. He half raised himself and succeeded in unfastening his fur coat, and thus discovered that apparently none of his bones was broken.

But the plane must have fallen from a considerable

height to have been smashed so badly. Then Tommy discovered that he was lying upon an extensive mound of sand, thrown up as by some gigantic mole, for burrow tracks ran through it in every direction. It was this that had saved his life.

Something was moving at his side. It was half-submerged in the sand-pile, and it was moving parallel to him with great rapidity.

A grayish body, half-covered with grains of sand emerged, waving two enormously long tentacles. It was a shrimp, but fully three feet in length, and Tommy had never before had any idea what an unpleasant object a shrimp is.

Tommy staggered to his feet and dropped nearer the plane, eyeing the shrimp with horror. But he was soon relieved as he discovered that it was apparently harmless. It slithered away and once more buried itself in the pile of sand.

Now Tommy was beginning to remember. He looked into the wreckage of the plane. Jim Dodd was not

there. He called his name repeatedly, and there was no response, except a dull echo from the ice-mountains behind the veil of fog.

He went to the other side of the plane, he scanned the ground all about him. Jimmy had disappeared. It was evident that he was nowhere near, for Tommy could see the whole of the lower scope of the bowl on every side of him. He had walked away—or he had been carried away! Tommy thought of the shrimp, and shuddered. What other fearsome monsters might inhabit that extraordinary valley?

He sat down, leaning against the wreck of the fuselage, and tried to adjust his mind, tried to keep himself from going mad. He knew now that the flight had been no dream, that he was a member of his uncle's expedition, that he had flown with Jim toward the pole, had crashed in a vacuum. But where was Jim? And how were they going to get out of the damn place?

Something like a heap of stones not far away attracted Tommy's attention. Perhaps Jim Dodd was

lying behind that. Once more Tommy got upon his feet and began walking toward it. On the way, he stumbled against the sharp edge of something that protruded from the ground.

It cut his leg sharply, and, with a curse, he began rubbing his shin and looking at the thing. Then he saw that it was another of the fossil shells, half-buried in the marshy ooze on which he was treading. The ground in this lower part of the valley was a swamp, on account of the very fine mist falling from the fog clouds that surrounded it impenetrably on every side.

Then Tommy came upon another shell, and then another. And now he saw that there were piles of what he had taken to be rock everywhere, and that this was not rock but great heaps of the shells, all equally intact.

Hundreds of thousands of the prehistoric beetles must have died in that valley, perhaps overcome by some cataclysm.

Tommy examined the heap near which he stood; he

yelled Dodd's name, but again no answer came.

Instead, something began to stir among the heaps of shells. For a moment Tommy hoped against hope that it was Dodd, but it wasn't Dodd.

It was a living beetle!

A beetle fully five feet high as it stood erect, a pair of enormous wings outspread. And the head, which was larger than a man's, was the most frightful object Tommy had ever seen.

Jim Dodd would have said at once that this was one of the Curculionidae, or snout beetles, for a prolongation of the head between the eyes formed a sort of beak a foot in length. The mouth, which opened downward, was armed with terrific mandibles, while the huge, compound eyes looked like enormous crystals of cut glass. Immediately in front of the eyes were two mandibles as long as a man's arms, with feathery processes at the ends. In addition to these there were three pairs of legs, the front pair as long as a man's, the hind pair almost as long as a horse's.

Paralyzed with horror, Tommy watched the monster, which had apparently been disturbed by the vibrations of his voice, extract itself from among the shells. Then, with a bound that covered fifteen feet, it had lessened the distance between them by half.

And then a still more amazing thing happened. For of a sudden the hard shell slipped from the thorax, the wing-cases dropped off, the whole of the bony parts slipped to the ground with a clang, and a soft, defenseless thing went slithering away among the rocks.

The beetle had moulted!

Tommy dropped to the ground in the throes of violent nausea.

Then, looking up again, he saw the girl!

She was about a hundred yards away from him, very close to the fallen plane, and she must have emerged from a large hole in the ground which Tommy could now see under a ledge of overhanging rock.

She seemed to be dressed in a single garment which fell to her knees, and appeared to fit tightly about her body, but as she came nearer, Tommy, watching her, petrified by this latest apparition, discovered that it was woven of her own hair, which must have been of immense length, for it fell naturally to her shoulders, and thence was woven into this close-fitting material, a fringe an inch or two in length extending beneath the selvage.

She was about six feet tall, and apparently made after the normal human pattern. She moved with a slow, majestic swing, and if ever any female had seemed to Tommy to have the appearance of an angel, this unknown woman did.

She was so fair, in that flossy, flaxen covering, she moved with such easy grace, that Tommy, gaping, gradually crept nearer to her. She did not seem to see him. She was stooping over the very sand heap into which he had fallen. Suddenly, with lightning-like rapidity, her arms shot out, her hands began tunneling in the sand. With a cry of triumph she pulled out the shrimp Tommy had seen, or another

like it, and, stripping it off the shell, began devouring it with evident relish.

In the midst of her meal the girl raised her head and looked at Tommy. He saw that her eyes were filmed, vacant, dead. Then of a sudden a third membrane was drawn back across the pupils, and she saw him.

She let the shrimp drop to the ground, uttered a cry, and moved toward him with a tottering gait. She groped toward him with outstretched arms. And then she was blind again, for the membrane once more covered her pupils. It was as if her eyes were unable to endure even the dim light of the valley, through whose surrounding mists the low sun, setting just above the horizon, was unable to diffuse itself save as a brightening of the fog curtain.

Tommy stepped toward the girl. His outstretched hand touched hers. It was unquestionably a woman's hand he held, delicately warm, with exquisitely moulded fingers, in whose touch there seemed to be, for the girl, some tactile impression of him.

Again that membrane was drawn back from the girl's pupils for a fleeting flash. Tommy saw two eyes of intense black, their color contrasting curiously with the flaxen color of her hair and her white skin, almost the tint of an albino's. Those eyes had surveyed him, and appeared satisfied that he was one of her kind. She could not have seen very much in that almost instantaneous flash of vision. Queer, that membrane—as if she had been used to living in the dark, as if the full light of the day was unbearable!

She drew her hand away. Soft vocals came from her lips. Suddenly she turned swiftly. She could not have seen, but before Tommy had seen, she had sensed the presence of the old man who was creeping out of the hole in the mountainside.

He moved forward craftily, and then pounced upon the sand pile, and in a moment had pulled out another of the big shrimps, which he proceeded to devour with greedy relish. The girl, leaving Tommy's side, joined him in that unpleasant feast.

And in the midst of it a flood came pouring from the

hole—a flood of living beetles, covering the ground in fifteen-foot leaps as they dashed at the two.

To his horror, Tommy saw Jimmy Dodd among them, wrapped in his fur coat like a mummy, and being pushed and rolled forward like a football.

For a moment Tommy hesitated, torn between his solicitude for Jim Dodd and that for the girl. Then, as the foremost of the monsters bounded to her side, he ran between them. The vicious jaws snapped within six inches of Tommy's face, with a force that would have carried away an ear, or shredded the cheek, if they had met.

Tommy struck out with all his might, and his fist clanged on the resounding shell so that the blood spurted from his bruised knuckles. He had struck the monster squarely upon the thorax, and he had not discommodeed it in the least. It turned on him, its glassy, many-faceted eyes glaring with a cold, infernal light. Tommy struck out again with his left hand, this time upon the pulpy flesh of the downward-opening mouth.

An inch higher, and he would have impaled his hand upon the beak, with a point like a needle, and evidently used for purposes of attack, since it was not connected with the mandibles. The blow appeared to fall in the only vulnerable place. The monster dropped upon its back and lay there, unable to reverse itself, its antenna and forelegs waving in the air, and the rear legs rasping together in a shrill, strident shriek.

Instantly, as Tommy darted out of the way, the swarm fell upon the helpless monster and began devouring it, tearing strips of flesh from the lower shell, which in the space of a half-minute was reduced simply to bone. The most horrible feature of this act of cannibalism was the complete silence with which it was performed, except for the rasping of the dying monster's legs. It was evident that the huge beetles had no vocal apparatus.

For the moment left unguarded, Jim Dodd flung down the collar of his fur coat, stared about him, and recognized Tommy.

"My God, it's you!" he yelled. "Well, can you—?"

He had no time to finish his sentence. A pair of antenna went round his neck from behind. At the same instant Tommy, the old man, and the girl were gripped by the monsters, which, forming a solid phalanx about them, began hustling them in the direction of the hole. Resistance was utterly impossible. Tommy felt as if he was being pushed along by a moving wall of stone.

Inside the opening it was completely dark. Tommy shouted to Dodd, but the strident sounds of the moving legs drowned his cries. He was being pushed forward into the unknown.

Suddenly the ground seemed to fall away beneath his feet. He struggled, cried out, and felt himself descending through the air.

For a full half-minute he went downward at a speed that constricted his throat so that he could hardly draw breath. Then, just as he had nerved himself for the imminent crash, the speed of his descent was checked. In another moment he found that he was slowing to a standstill in mid-air.

He was beginning to float backward—upward. But the wall of moving shells, pushing against him, forced him on, downward, and yet apparently against the force of gravitation.

Then of a sudden Tommy was aware of a dim light all about him. His feet touched earth and grass as softly as a thistledown alighting.

He found himself seated in the same dim light upon red grass, and staring into Jimmy's face.

Chapter 3: Ten Miles Underground

"What I was going to say when we were interrupted, was, 'Can you beat it?'" Jimmy Dodd observed, with admirable sang-froid.

They were still seated on the red grass, gazing about them at what looked like an illimitable plain, and upward into depths of darkness. It was warm, and the light, furnished by what appeared to be luminous vegetation, was about that of twilight.

On every side were clumps of trees and shrubs, which formed centers of phosphorescent illumination, but for the most part the land was open, and here and there human figures appeared, moving with head down and arms hanging earthward.

"No, I'm damned if I can," said Tommy. "What happened to you after we crashed?"

"Why, first thing I knew, I found myself riding on the back of a fossil beetle, apparently one of the *curculionidae*," said Dodd.

"Never, mind being so precise, Jimmy. Let's call it a beetle. Go on."

"They set me down inside the hole and seemed to be investigating me, the whole swarm of them. Of course, I thought I was dead, and come to my just reward, especially when I saw those beaks. Then one of them began tickling my face with its antenna, and I drew up my fur collar. They didn't seem to like the feel of the fur, and after a while the whole gang started hustling me back again, like a nest of ants carrying something they don't want outside their hill. And then you bobbed up."

"Well, my opinion is you saved your life by pulling up your collar," said Tommy. "Looks to me as if it's a case of the survival of the fittest, said fittest being the insect, and the human race taking second place. You know what the humans here live on, don't you?"

"No, what?"

"Shrimps as big as poodles. If you'd seen that girl and the old man getting outside them, you'd realize that

there seems to be a food shortage in this part of the world. Say, where in thunder are we, Jimmy?"

"Haven't you guessed yet, Travers?" asked Dodd, a spice of malice in his voice.

"I suppose this is some sort of big hole on the site of the south pole, with warm vapors coming up. Maybe a great fissure in the earth, or something."

Jimmy Dodd's grin, seen in the half-light, was rather disconcerting. "How far do you think we dropped just now?" Dodd asked.

"Why, I'd say several hundred yards," replied Tommy.
"What's your estimate?"

"Just about ten miles," answered Dodd.

"What? You're still crazy! Why, we slowed up!"

"Yeah," grinned Dodd, "we slowed up. We're inside the crust of the world. That's the long and short of it. The earth we've known is just a shell over our heads."

"Yeah? Walking head downward, are we? Then why don't we drop to the center of the earth, you damn fool?"

"Because, my dear fellow, you can swing a pailful of water round your head without spilling any of it. In other words, our old friend, centrifugal force. The speed with which the earth is rotating, keeps us on our feet, head downward. To be precise, the center of the earth's gravity lies in the middle of the hollow sphere, of course, but the counteraction of centrifugal force throws it outward to the middle of the ten-mile crust. That's why we slowed down after we were half-way through. We were moving against gravity."

"And what's up there, or down there, or whatever you call it?" asked Tommy, pointing to what ought to have been the sky.

"Nothing. It's the center of the tennis ball, though I imagine it's pretty near a vacuum when you get up a mile or so, owing to the speed of the earth's rotation, which forces the heat into the shell."

"You mean to say you actually believe that stuff you've been handing me?" asked Tommy, after a pause.

"Then how did human beings get here, and those damn beetles? And why's the grass red?"

"The grass is red because there's no sunlight to produce chlorophyll. The inhabitants of the deep sea are red or black, almost invariably. In the case of the humans, they've become bleached. My belief is that that man and woman we saw, and those"—he pointed to the vague forms of human beings, who moved across the grass, gathering something—"are survivors of the primitive race that still exists as the Australians. Undoubtedly one of the branches of the human stock originated in antarctica at a time when it enjoyed a tropical temperature, and was the land bridge between Australia and South America."

"And the—beetles?" asked Tommy.

"Ah, they go back to the days when nature was in a more grandiose mood!" replied the archaeologist enthusiastically. "That's the most wonderful discovery of the ages. The world will go crazy over them when

we bring back the first living specimens to the zoological parks of the great cities.

"But," Dodd went on, speaking with still more enthusiasm, "of course, this is only the beginning, Tommy. There are ten million species of insects, according to Riley, and it is inevitable that there must be hundreds of thousands of other survivals from the age of the great saurians, perhaps even some of the saurians themselves. Who knows but that we may discover the ancestor of the extinct monotremes, the rhynchocephalia, the pterodactyls, hatch a brood of aepyornis eggs—"

"And," said Tommy tartly, "how are we going to get them back, apart from the little problem of getting out of here ourselves?"

"Don't let's worry about that now," answered Dodd. "It will take ten years of the hardest kind of labor even to begin a classification of the inhabitants of this inner world. I could sit down for ever, and—"

But Jimmy Dodd rose to his feet as a pair of antenna

whipped round his neck and jerked him bodily upward.

One of the monster beetles was standing upright behind them, and by its gestures it evidently meant that Dodd and Tommy were to join the crowd of humans in the offing. As Dodd turned upon it with an indignant show of fists, one of the antennae whipped off his fur coat and stung him painfully with the bristle-like attachment at the end.

It was a painful moment when Dodd and Tommy realized that they were powerless against the monstrous beetles.



[Image description start: A black and white illustration showing two men facing off against a giant spotted beetle, with more humans in the background fighting another group of beetles. Image description end.]

Tommy tried the uppercut with which he had knocked out the deceased monster, but the quick jerks of the present beetle's head were infinitely faster than the movements of his fists, while the antenna had a whiplike quality about them that speedily convinced him that discretion was the card to play.

Under the threat of the curling antenna, Tommy and Dodd moved in the direction of the slowly circulating humans. Numerous tiny rodents, which evidently kept the red grass short, scampered away under their feet. The beetles made no further effort to force them on, but now they could see that a number of the monsters were stationed at intervals around a wide circle, keeping the humans in a single body.

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Tommy, stopping. "See what they're doing, Dodd? They're herding us, like cowboys

herd steers. Look at that!"

One of the herd, a male with a long beard, suddenly broke from the herd, bawling, and flung himself upon a beetle guard. The antenna shot forth, coiled around his neck, and hurled him a dozen feet to the ground, where he lay stunned for a moment before arising and rejoining his companions.

"But what are they looking for?" demanded Dodd.

Tommy had not heard him. He had stopped in front of one of the luminous trees and was plucking a fruit from it.

"Jimmy, ever see an apple before?" he asked. "If this isn't an apple, I'll eat my head."

It certainly was an apple, and one of the largest and juiciest that Tommy had ever tasted. It was the reddest apple he had ever seen, and would have won the first prize at any agricultural fair.

"And look at this!" shouted Tommy, plucking an

enormous luminous peach from another tree.

They began munching slowly, then, seeing one of the beetle guards approaching them, they moved into the midst of the crowd.

"Did you notice anything strange about those fruit trees?" inquired Dodd, as he munched. "I'll swear they were monocotyledonous, which, after all, is what one would expect. Still, to think that the monocotyledons evolved the familiar drupes, or stone fruits, on a parallel line to the dicotyledons is—amazing!"

A box on the ear like the kick of a mule's hoof jerked the last word from his lips as he went sprawling. He got up, to see the girl standing before him, intense disgust and anger on her face.

She snatched the fruits from the hands of the two Americans and hurled them away. It was evident from her manner that she considered such diet in the highest degree unclean and disgusting; also that she considered herself charged with the duty of

superintending Tommy's and Dodd's education, but especially Dodd's.

Taking him by the arm, she propelled him into the midst of the groping humans. She released him, stooped, and suddenly stood up, a shrimp about eighteen inches long in her hand.

Towering over Dodd by six inches, she took his face in her hands and began caressing him; then, seizing his jaws in her strong fingers, she pried them apart, and popped the tail end of the shrimp into his mouth.

Dodd let out a yelp, and spat out the love-gift, to be rewarded with another box on the ear by the young Amazon, while Tommy stood by, convulsed with laughter, and yet in considerable trepidation, for fear of being forced to share Dodd's fate.

For the girl was again holding out the tail end of the crustacean, and Jim Dodd's jaws were slowly and reluctantly approaching it.

But suddenly there came an intervention as the

strident rasping of beetle legs was heard in the distance. Panic seized the human herd, grovelling for shrimps in the sandy soil with its tufts of red grasses. Milling in an uneasy mob, they cowered under the lashes of the antenna of the beetle guards, which sacrificed their backs through their hair garments whenever any of them tried to bolt.

Nearer and nearer came the beetles, louder and more penetrating the shriek of their rasping legs. Now the swarm came into sight, rank after rank of the shell-clad monsters, leaping fifteen feet at a bound with perfect precision, until they had formed a solid phalanx all around the humans.

Tommy heard sighs of despair, he heard muttering, and then he realized, with deep thankfulness, that these human beings, degraded though they were, had a speech of their own.

In the middle of the front line appeared a beetle a foot taller than the rest. That it was either a king or queen was evident from the respect paid it by the rest of the swarm. At its every movement a bodyguard of beetles

moved in unison, forming themselves in a group before it and on either side.

There would have been something ludicrous about these movements, but for the impression of horror that the swarm made upon Tommy and Jim Dodd. Hitherto both had supposed that the hideous insects acted by blind instinct, but now there could no longer be any doubt that they were possessed of an organized intelligence.

The strident sounds grew louder. Already Tommy was beginning to discover certain variations in them. It was dawning upon him that they formed a language—and a perfectly intelligible one. For, as the note changed about a half-semitone, two of the monsters left the side of their ruler and reached the two men with three successive leaps.

Their movements left no doubt in either Tommy's or Dodd's mind what was required. The two strode hastily toward the assemblage, and stopped as the antenna of their guards came down in menacing fashion.

It was light enough for Tommy to see the face of the ruler of the hellish swarm. And it required all his powers of will to keep from collapsing from sheer horror at what he saw.

For, despite the close-fitting shell, the face of the beetle king was the face of a man—a white man!

Jim Dodd's shriek rang out above the shrilling of the beetle-legs, "Bram! It's you, it's you! My God, it's you, Bram!"

Chapter 4: Bram's Story

A sneering chuckle broke from Bram's lips. "Yes, it's me, James Dodd," he answered. "I'm a little surprised to see you here, Dodd, but I'm mighty glad. Still insane upon the subject of fossil monotremes, I suppose?"

The words came haltingly from Bram's lips, as from those of a man who had lost the habit of easy speech. And Tommy, looking on, and trying to keep in possession of his faculties, had already come to the conclusion that the sounds were inaudible to the beetles. Probably their hearing apparatus was not attuned to such slow vibrations of the human voice.

Also he had discovered that Bram was wearing the discarded shell of one of the monsters: he had not grown the shell himself. It was fastened about his body by a band of the hair-cloth, fastened to the two protuberances of the elytra, or wing-cases, on either side of the dorsal surface.

The discovery at least robbed the situation of one aspect of terror. Bram, however he had obtained control of the swarm, was still only a man.

"Yes, still insane," answered Dodd bitterly. "Insane enough to go on believing that the polyprotodontia and the dasyuridae, which includes the peramelidae, or bandicoots, and the banded ant-eaters, or myrmecobidae, are not to be found in fossil form, for the excellent reason that they were not represented before the Upper Cretaceous period."

"You lie! You lie!" screamed Bram. "I have shown to all the world that phascalotherium, amphitherium, amblitherium, spalacotherium, and many other orders are to be found in the Upper Jurassic rocks of England, Wyoming, and other places. You—you are the man who denied the existence of the nototherium, of the marsupial lion, in pleistocene deposits! You denied that the dasyuridae can be traced back beyond the pleistocene. And you stand there and lie to me, when you are at my mercy!"

"For God's sake don't aggravate him," whispered

Tommy to Dodd. "Don't you see that he's insane? Humor him, or we'll be dead men. Think what the world will lose, if you are never able to go back with your specimens," he added craftily.

But Dodd, whose eyes were glaring, said a sublime thing: "I have given my life to science, and I will never deny my master!"

With a screech, which, however, was evidently inaudible to the beetles, Bram leaped at Dodd and seized him by the throat. The two men fell to the ground, the ponderous beetle-shell completely covering them. Underneath it they could be seen to be struggling desperately. All the while the beetle horde remained perfectly motionless. Tommy thought afterward that in this fact lay their brightest chances of escape, if Bram's immediate vengeance did not fall on them.

Either because Bram was not himself a beetle, or because in some other way the swarm instinct was not stirred, the monsters watched the struggle with complete indifference.

At the moment, however, Tommy was only concerned with saving Dodd from the madman. He got his foot beneath the shell, then inserted his leg; using his whole body as a lever, he succeeded in turning Bram over on his back.

Then, and only then, the swarm rushed in upon them. Then Tommy realized that he had touched one of the triggers that regulated the beetle's automatism. In another instant Bram would have been torn to pieces. The needle-beaks were darting through the air, the hideous jaws were snapping. Bram's yells rang through the cavern.

Dodging beneath the avalanche of the monsters, Tommy got Bram upon his feet again. The beetles stopped, every movement arrested. Bram's hand went to the pocket of his tattered coat, there came a snap, a flash. Bram had ignited an automatic cigarette-lighter!

Instantly the monsters went scurrying away into the distance. And Tommy had another clue. The beetles, living in the dimness of the underworld, could not

stand light or fire!

He ran to where Jimmy was lying, face upward, on the ground. His face was badly scarred by Bram's nails, and the blood was spurting from a long gash in his throat, made by the sharp flint that was lying beside him.

He had some time before discarded his fur coat. Now he pulled off his coat, and, tearing off the tail of his shirt, he made a pad and a bandage, with which he attempted to staunch the blood and bind the wound. It must have taken ten minutes before the failing heart force enabled him to get the bleeding under control. Dodd had nearly bled to death, his face was drawn and waxen, but, because the pulsation was so feeble, the artery had ceased to spurt.

Then only did Tommy take notice of Bram. He had been squatting near, and Tommy realized that he had unconsciously observed Bram put some sort of pellets into his mouth. Now he realized that Bram was a drug fiend. That was what had made him walk out of the Greystoke camp in the storm.

Bram got up and came toward them. "Is he dead?" he whispered hoarsely. "I—I lost my temper. You two—I don't intend to kill you. There—there's room for the three of us. I've got—plans of the utmost importance to humanity."

"I don't think much of the way you've started to carry them out," answered Tommy bitterly. "No, he's not dead yet, but I wouldn't give much for his chances, even in the best hospital. The best thing you can do now is to go to hell, and take your beetles with you," he added.

Bram, without replying, raised his head and emitted from his throat the shrillest whistle that Tommy had ever heard. The response was amazing.

Rasping out of the darkness came eight beetles in pairs. Instead of leaping from an upright position, they trotted in the manner of horses, on all fours, their shells, which touched at the edges, forming a solid surface, gently rounded in the center so that a man's body could lie there and fit snugly into the groove.

"Help me get him up," said Bram. "Trust me! I'll do my best for him. If we leave him here they may kill and eat him. I can't trust all those beetle guards."

Tommy hesitated a moment, then decided to follow Bram's suggestion. Together they raised the unconscious man to the beetle-shell couch. Bram seated himself upon the boss of one of the beetle-shells in front, and Tommy jumped up behind.

Next moment, to his amazement, the trained steeds were flying smoothly through the air, at a rate that could not have been less than seventy-five to eighty miles an hour.

Tommy's shell seat was not a bed of roses, but he hardly noticed that. He was thinking that if Dodd lived they should be able to turn the tables.

For, unknown to Bram, he was in possession of the cigarette-lighter which he had picked up, and which Bram, in his agitation, had forgotten. It was full of petrol, or some other fluid of a similar nature, which Bram must have obtained from some natural source

within the earth. And, in an emergency, Tommy knew that he had the means of keeping the beetles at bay.

They had traveled for perhaps an hour when a faint light began to glow in the distance. It grew brighter, and a roaring sound became audible. A turn of the track that they were traversing, and the light became a glare. A terrific sight met Tommy's eyes.

Out of the bowels of the earth—actually out of the crust beneath their feet—there shot a pillar of roaring flame, of intense white color, and radiating a heat that was perceptible even at a distance of several hundred yards. The beetle steeds dropped gently to the ground; they halted. Bram got down, grinning.

"Nicely trained horses, what?" he asked. "By the way, you have the advantage of me in names. Who and what are you?"

Tommy told him.

"Well, Travers, it looks as if we're going to be companions for some time to come, and I quite admit

you saved my life back there. So we don't want to start with secrets. This is a natural petrol spring, which has probably been burning undiminished for ages. My trained beetles are blind—you didn't happen to notice I'd cut off their antenna? But the rest of the swarm daren't come near it. So that makes me their master.

"Pretty trick, what, Travers? I'm the Lord of the Flame down here, and I'm using my advantage. But don't get the idea of supplanting me. There are lots of other tricks you don't know anything about, and I'll have to trust you better before—"

He broke off and slipped another pellet into his mouth.

"Help me get Dodd down, if this is our destination," answered Tommy.

They lifted Dodd to the ground. He was conscious now, and moaning for water. The two men carried him into a sort of large cavern, at the farther end of which the fire was roaring. Bram went to a spring that

trickled down one side, filled something that looked like a petrified lily calyx, and brought it to Dodd, who drained it.

Tommy looked about him. He was astonished to see that the place was, in a way, furnished. Bram had carved out a very creditable couch, and several low chairs, evidently with a stone ax, for by the light of the fire, which cast a fair illumination even at that distance, Tommy could see the marks of the implement, rough and irregular, in the wood.

On the ground were thick rugs, woven of hair, and two or three more rugs of the same material lay on the couch. It was evident that the human herd was expected to furnish textile materials as well as meat.

"Sit down, and make yourself comfortable," said Bram, when they had raised Dodd to the couch. "We'll have dinner, and then we'll talk. I can give you a fine vegetarian meal. Those dirty shrimp-eating savages look on me as a cannibal because I eat the fruits of the trees." He grinned. "There's a bad shortage of food in Submundia, as I've named this part of the

world," he went on, "for until I came the beetles simply devoured the humans wholesale, instead of breeding them, like I taught them. And there's another of the hundred-and-fifty year swarms due to hatch out soon. However, we'll talk about that later. And all those fine fruits going to waste! Excuse me, Travers."

He disappeared, and returned in a minute or two with a small table, piled high with luscious fruits unknown to Tommy, though among them were some that looked like loaves of natural bread.

Tommy, whose appetite never failed him even in the worst circumstances, fell to with a will. He was enjoying his meal when he happened to look up, and saw that the penumbra at the edge of the lighted zone was dense with beetles.

Thousands—perhaps millions, for they stretched away as far as the eye could see, were packed together, their antenna waving in unison, their heads, beneath the shells, directed toward the fire.

Bram saw Tommy's look of disgust, and laughed. "The fire seems to intoxicate them, Travers," he said. "They always throng the entrance when I'm here. It's as far as they dare go. They're quite blind in the least light. Care to smoke? I've learned the art of making some quite decent cigars." He produced a handful. "Oh, by the way, you didn't see my lighter anywhere, did you?" he went on, with a pretense of carelessness.

"No," lied Tommy. "I was surprised you—"

"Oh, there's a supply of petrol in the rocks. No matter," answered Bram carelessly. "Your friend looks bad," he added, glancing at Dodd, who had fallen asleep. "Travers, I'm sorry I lost my temper. The—the shock of meeting men from the upper world, you know."

Dodd opened his eyes and tried to whisper. Tommy bent over him and listened.

"He wants to know whether he can have that girl to take care of him," he said.

"What, the one I saw you with? Why, she's a cull, Travers."

"What d'you mean?" asked Tommy.

"Why—useless, you know. There's several of them running loose, and waiting to be rounded up. We raise two breeds, one for replenishing the stock, and one for meat. She's just a cull, a reversion, no use for either purpose. I'll have her brought by all means. I—I like Dodd. I want to get him to like me," Bram went on, with a sort of penitence that had a pathetic touch. "Our little differences—quite absurd, and I can prove he's wrong in his ideas.

"Make yourself comfortable as long as you're here, Travers, and don't mind me. Only, don't try to escape. The beetles will get you if you do, and there's no way out of here—none that you'll find. And don't try to follow me. But you're a sensible man, and we'll all get along famously, I'm sure, as soon as Dodd recovers."

Chapter 5: Doomed!

There were no means known to Tommy of reckoning time in that strange place of twilight. His watch had been broken in the airplane fall; and Dodd never remembered to wind his, but they estimated that about two weeks had passed, judging from the number of times they had slept and eaten.

In those two weeks they had gradually begun to grow accustomed to their surroundings. Haidia, the girl, had arrived on beetle-back within an hour after Bram's departure, apparently into a cleft of the rocks —how he had communicated his order to the beetle steeds Tommy had no idea. And under the girl's ministrations Dodd was making good progress toward recovery.

That Haidia was in love with Dodd in quite a human way was evident. To please the girl, both Dodd and Tommy had learned to eat the raw shrimps, which, being bloodless, were really no worse than oysters, and had a flavor half-way between shrimp and

crawfish. To please the men, Haidia tried not to shudder when she saw them devouring the breadfruit and nectarines of which Bram always had a plentiful supply. Bram was solicitous in his inquiries for Dodd's health.

"Jim, I've been thinking about our chances of getting away," said Tommy one morning. "It's evident Bram's only waiting for your recovery to put some proposition up to us. Suppose you were to feign paralysis."

"How d'you mean? What for?" demanded Dodd.

"If he thinks you're helpless, he'll be less on his guard. You haven't walked about in his presence." That was true, for the activities of the two had been nocturnal, when Bram had vanished. "Let him think a nerve's been severed in your neck, or something of the sort. If it doesn't work, you can always get better."

Dodd's realistic portrayal of a man with a partly paralyzed right side brought cries of horror from Bram next morning. Solicitously he helped Dodd back

to the couch. Bram, when not under the influence of his drug, had moments of human feeling.

"Can't you move that arm and leg at all, Dodd?" he asked. "No feeling in them?"

"There's plenty of feeling," growled Dodd, "but they don't seem to work, that's all."

"You'll get better," said Bram eagerly. "You must get better. I need you, Dodd, in spite of our differences. There's work for all of us, wonderful work. A new humanity, waiting to be born, Dodd, not of the miserable ape race, but of—of—"

He checked himself, and a cunning look came over his face. He turned away abruptly.

At the end of two weeks or so, an amazing thing happened. One day Haidia, with a look of triumph in her eyes, addressed Dodd with a few English words!

Her brain, which had probably developed certain faculties in different proportions from those of the

upper human race, had registered every word that either of the two men had ever spoken, and remembered it. As soon as Dodd ascertained this, he began to instruct her, and, with her abnormal faculties of memory, it was not long before she could talk quite intelligently. The obstacle that had stood between them was swept away. She became one of themselves.

In the days that followed the girl told them brokenly something of the history of her race, of the legend of the universal flood that had driven them down into the bowels of the earth, of the centuries-long struggle with the beetles, and of the insects' gradual conquest of humanity, and the final reduction of the human race to a miserable, helpless remnant.

Everywhere, Haidia told them, were beetle swarms, everywhere humanity had been reduced to a few handfuls. Bram, by breeding mankind from prolific strains, and using the new-born progeny for food, had temporarily averted universal starvation. But a new swarm of beetles was due to hatch out shortly, and then—

The girl, with a shudder, put her hand to her bosom, and brought out a little bright-eyed lizard.

"The old man you saw with me, who is one of our wise elders, has told our people that these things feed upon the beetle larvae," she said. "We are putting them secretly into the nests. But what can a few lizards do against millions." She looked up. "In the earth above us, the beetle larvae extend for miles, in a solid mass," she said. "When they come out as beetles, it will be the end of all of us."

Bram had grown less suspicious as the time passed. His sudden visits to the cavern had ceased. Dodd and Tommy knew that he spent the nights—if they could be termed nights—lying in a drugged slumber somewhere among the rocks. They had asked Haidia whether there was any way of escape into the upper world.

"There are two ways from here," answered the girl. "One is the way you came, but it is impossible to pass the beetle guards without being torn to pieces. The other—"

She shuddered, and for an instant drew back the film from across her pupils, then uttered a little cry of pain at the light, dim though it was.

"There is a bridge across that terrible monster that devours all it touches," she said, shuddering, meaning the fire.

Suddenly Dodd had an inspiration. He still had the fur coat that he had worn, and, reaching into a pocket he drew out a pair of snow goggles, which he adjusted over Haidia's nose.

"Now look!" he said.

Haidia looked, blinked and, with an effort kept her eyes open. She gazed at Dodd in amazement. Dodd laughed, and pulled her toward him. He kissed her, and Haidia's eyes closed.

"What is this?" she murmured. "First you give me medicine that opens my eyes, and then you give me medicine that closes them."

"That's nothing," grinned Dodd. "Wait till you understand me better."

Bram's eyes were preternaturally bright. It was evident that he had been increasing his dose of late, and that he was fully under the influence of it now.

"Well, gentlemen, the time has come for us to be frank with one another," he said, as the three were gathered about the little table, while Haidia crouched in a far corner of the cave. "I want you to work for me in my plans for the regeneration of humanity. The time for which I have long labored is almost at hand. Any day now the new swarm of beetles may emerge from the pupal stage. But before I speak further, come and see them, gentlemen!"

He rose, and Dodd and Tommy rose too, Tommy supporting Dodd, who let his arm and leg trail awkwardly as he moved.

Bram led the way into the cleft among the rocks into which he had been in the habit of passing. Beyond this opening the two men saw another smaller cavern,

with a beetle guard standing on either side, antenna waving.

Bram shrilled a sound, and the antenna dropped. The three passed through. Tommy saw a hair-cloth pallet set against the rocks, a table, and a chair. Beyond was a sloping ramp of earth. Overhead was a rock ceiling.

Bram led the way up the ramp, and the three stepped through a gap in the rocks and found themselves on an extensive prairie. But in place of the red grass there was a vast sea of mud.

By the light cast by the petrol fire, which roared up in the distance, a veritable fiery fountain, the two Americans could see that the mud was filled with huge encysted forms, grubs three or four feet long, motionless in the soil.

Bram scooped up one of them and tossed it into the air. It thudded to their feet and remained motionless.

"As far as you can see, and for miles beyond, these pupae of the beetles lie buried in the decaying

vegetation in which the eggs were hatched," said Bram. "Every century and a half, so far as I have been able to judge from comparative anatomy, a fresh swarm emerges. See!"

He pointed to the pupa he had unearthed, which, as if stirred into activity by his handling, was now beginning to move. Or, rather, something was moving inside the cocoon.

The shell broke, and the hideous head and folded antenna of a beetle appeared. With a convulsive writhing, the monster threw off the covering and stepped out. It extended its wings, glistening, with moisture, from the still soft and pliant carapace, or shell, and suddenly zoomed off into the distance.

Tommy shuddered as the boom of its flight grew softer and subsided.

"Any day now the entire swarm will emerge," cried Bram. "How many moultings they undergo before they undergo the finished state, I do not know, but already, as you see, they are prepared for the battle of

life. They emerge ravenous. That beetle will fall upon the man-herds and devour a full grown man, unless the guards destroy it."

He raised his arms with the gesture of an ancient prophet. "Woe to the human race," he cried, "the wretched ape spawn that has cast out its teachers and persecuted those who sought to raise it to higher things!"

Tommy knew that Bram was referring to himself. Bram turned fiercely upon Dodd.

"When I joined the Greystoke expedition," he cried, "it was with the express intention of refuting your miserable theories as to the fossil monotremes. I could not sleep or eat, so deeply was I affronted by them. For, if they were true, the dasyuridae are an innovation in the great scheme of nature, and man, instead of being a mere afterthought, a jest of the Creative Force, came to earth with a purpose.

"That I deny," he yelled. "Man is a joke. Nature made him when she was tired, as the architect of a

cathedral fashions a gargoyle in a sportive moment. It is the insect, not man, who is the predestined lord of the ages!"

And for once in his life, perhaps because at this point Tommy dug him violently in the ribs, Dodd had the sense to remain silent. Bram led the way swiftly back into the larger cave.

"When this swarm hatches out," he said, "I calculate that there will be a trillion beetles seeking food. There is no food for a tithe of them here underneath the earth. What then? Do you realize their stupendous power, their invincibility?

"No, you don't realize it, because your minds, through long habit, are only attuned to think in terms of man. All man's long history of slaughter of the so-called lower creatures obsesses you, blinds your understanding. A beetle? Something to be trodden underfoot, crushed in sport! But I tell you, gentlemen, that nature—God, if you will—has designed to supplant the man-ape by the beetle.

"He has resolved to throw down the wretched so-called intelligence of your kind and mine, and supplant it by the divine instinct of the beetle, an instinct that is infinitely superior, because it arrives at results instantaneously. It knows where man infers. Attuned closely to nature, it alone is able to fulfil the divine plan of Creation."

Bram was certainly under the influence of his drug; nevertheless, so violent were his gestures, so inspired was his utterance, that Tommy and Dodd listened almost in awe.

"They are invincible," Bram went on. "Their fecundity is such that when the new swarm is hatched out their numbers alone will make them irresistible. They do not know fear. They shrink from nothing. And they will follow me, their leader—I, who know the means of controlling them. How, then, can puny man hope to stand against them?

"Join me, gentlemen," Bram went on. "And beware how you decide rashly. For this is the supreme moment, not only of your own lives, but for all

humanity and beetledom. Upon your decision hangs the future of the world.

"For, irresistible as the beetles are, there is one thing they lack. That is the sense of historic continuity. If they destroy man, they will know nothing of man's achievements, poor though these are. My own work on the fossil monotremes—"

"Which is a tissue of inaccuracies and half-baked deductions!" shouted Dodd.

Bram started as if a whip had lashed him. "Liar!" he bawled. "Do you think that I, who left the Greystoke expedition in a howling blizzard because I knew that here, in the inner earth, I could refute your miserable impostures—do you think that I am in the mood to listen to your wretched farrago of impossibilities?"

"Listen to me," bawled Dodd, advancing with waving arms. "Once and for all, let me tell you that your deductions are all based upon fallacious premises. No, I will not shut up, Tom Travers! You want me to aid your damned beetles in the destruction of

humanity! I tell you that your phascalotherium, amphitherium, and all the rest of them, including the marsupial lion, are degenerate developments of the age following the pleistocene. I say the whole insect world was made to fertilize the plant world, so that it should bear fruit for human food. Man is the summit of the scale of evolution, and I will never join in any infamous scheme for his destruction."

Bram glared at Dodd like a madman. Three times he opened his mouth to speak, but only inarticulate sounds came from his throat. And when at last he did speak, he said something that neither Dodd nor Tommy had anticipated.

"It looks as if you're not so paralysed as you made out," he sneered. "You'll change your mind within what used to be called a day, Dodd. You'll crawl to my feet and beg for pardon. And you'll recant your lying theories about the fossil monotremes, or you die—the pair of you—you die!"

Chapter 6: Escape!

"I heard what he said. You shall not die. We shall go away to your place, where there are no beetles to eat us, even if"—Haidia shuddered—"even if we have to cross the bridge of fire, beyond which, they tell me, lies freedom."

High over and a little to one side of the petrol flame Dodd and Tommy had seen the slender arch of rock leading into another cleft in the rocks. They had investigated it several times, but always the fierce heat had driven them back.

Both Dodd and Tommy had noticed, however, that at times the fire seemed to shrink in volume and intensity. Observation had shown them that these times were periodical, recurring about every twelve hours.

"I think I've got the clue, Tommy," said Dodd, as the three watched the fiery fountain and speculated on the possibility of escape. "That flow of petrol is controlled, like the tides on earth, by the pull of the

moon. Just now it is at its height. I've noticed that it loses pretty nearly half its volume at its alternating phase. If I'm right, we'll make the attempt in about twelve hours."

"Bram's given us twenty-four," said Tommy. "But how about getting Haidia across?"

"I go where you go," said Haidia, sidling up to Dodd and looking down upon him lovingly. "I do not afraid of the fire. If it burn me up, I go to the good place."

"Where's that, Haidia?" asked Dodd.

"When we die, we go to a place where it is always dark and there are no beetles, and the ground is full of shrimps. We leave our bodies behind, like the beetles, and fly about happy for ever."

"Not a bad sort of place," said Dodd, squeezing Haidia's arm. "If you think you're ready to try to cross the bridge, we'll start as soon as the fire gets lower."

"I'll be on the job," answered Haidia, unconsciously

reproducing a phrase of Tommy's.

The girl glided away, and disappeared through the thick of the beetle crowd clustered about the entrance to the cavern. Tommy and Dodd had already discovered that it was through her ability to reproduce a certain beetle sound meaning "not good to eat" that the girl could come and go. They had once tried it on their own account, and had narrowly escaped the lashing tentacles.

After that there was nothing to do but wait. Three or four hours must have passed when Bram returned from his inner cave.

"Well, Dodd, have you experienced a change of heart?" he sneered. "If you knew what's in store for you, maybe you'd come to the conclusion that you've been too cocksure about the monotremes. We're slaughtering in the morning."

"That so?" asked Dodd.

"That's so," shouted Bram. "The beetles are beginning

to emerge from the pupae, and they'll need food if they're to be kept quiet. We're rounding up about threescore of the culls—your friend Haidia will be among them. We've got some caged ichneumon flies, pretty little things only a foot long, which will sting them in certain nerve centers, rendering them powerless to move. Then we shall bury them, standing up, in the vegetable mould, for the beetles to devour alive, as soon as they come out of the shells. You'll feel pretty, Dodd, standing there unable to move, with the new born beetles biting chunks out of you."

Tommy shuddered, despite his hopes of their escaping. Bram, for a scientist, had a grim and picturesque imagination.

"Dodd, there is no personal quarrel between us," Bram went on. Again that note of pathetic pleading came into his voice. "Give up your mad ideas. Admit that the banded ant-eater, at least, existed before the pleistocene epoch, and everything can be settled. When you see what my beetles are going to do to humanity, you'll be proud to join us. Only make a beginning. You remember the point I made in my

paper, about spalacotherium in the Upper Jurassic rocks. It would convince anybody but a hardened fanatic."

"I read your paper, and I saw your so-called spalacotherium, reconstructed from what you called a jaw-bone," shouted Dodd. "That so-called jaw-bone was a lump of chalk, made porous by water, and the rest was in your imagination. Do your worst, Bram, I'll never crucify truth to save my life. And I'll laugh at your spalacotherium when your beetles are eating me."

Bram yelled and shrieked, he stamped up and down the cavern, shaking his fists at Dodd. At last, with a final torrent of objurgation, he disappeared.

"A pleasant customer," said Tommy. "We'll have to make that bridge, Jim, no question about it, even if it means death in the petrol fire."

"Fire's dying down fast," answered Dodd. "Haidia ought to be here soon."

"If Bram hasn't got her."

"Bram got—that girl? If Bram harms a hair of her head I'll kill him with worse tortures than he's ever dreamed of," answered Dodd, leaping up, white with rage.

"You mean you—?" Tommy began.

"Love her? Yes, I love her," shouted Dodd. "She's a girl in a million. Just the sort of helpmate I need to assist me in my work when we get back. I tell you, Tommy, I didn't know what love meant before I saw Haidia. I laughed at it as a romantic notion. 'Oh lyric love, half angel and half bird!'" he quoted, beginning to stride up and down the cavern, while Tommy watched him in amazement.

And at this moment a complete beetle entered the cave. Complete, because it had a plastron, or breast-shell, as well as a back-shell, or carapace.

A double breast-shell! A new species of beetle? An executioner beetle, sent by Bram to summon them to

the torture? Tommy shuddered, but Dodd, lost in his love ecstasy, was ignorant of the creature's advent.

"Oh lyric love—'" he shouted again, as he twirled on his heel, to run smack into the monster. The crack of Dodd's head against the beetle-shell re-echoed through the cave.

The double plastron dropped, the carapace fell down: Haidia stood revealed. The lovers, folded in each other's arms, passed momentarily into a trance.

It was Tommy who separated them. "We'll have to make a move," he said. "I think the fire's as low as it ever gets. Why did you bring the shells, Haidia?"

"To save us all from the beetles," answered the girl. "When they see us in the shells, they will not know we are human. That is what makes it so hard to have to be eaten by those beetles, when they are such dumb-bells," she added, reproducing another of Tommy's words.

"Come," she continued bravely, "let us see if we can

pass the fire."

The roaring fountain made the air a veritable inferno. Overhead the rocks were red-hot. A cascade of sparks tumbled in a fiery shower from the rock roof. Dodd, holding Haidia in his arms, to protect her, staggered ahead, with Tommy in the rear. Only the beetle-shells, which acted as non-conductors of the heat, made that fiery passage possible.

There was one moment when it seemed to Tommy as if he must let go, and drop into that raging furnace underneath. He heard Dodd bawling hoarsely in front of him, he nerved himself to a last effort, beating fiercely at his blazing hair—and then the heat was past, and he had dropped unconscious upon a bed of cool earth beside a rushing river.

He was vaguely aware of being carried in Dodd's arms, but a long time seemed to have passed before he grew conscious again. He opened his eyes in utter darkness. Dodd was whispering in his ear.

"Tommy, old man, how are you feeling now?" Dodd

asked.

"All—right," Tommy muttered. "How's Haidia?"

"Still unconscious, poor girl. We've got to get out of here. I heard Bram yelling in the distance. He's discovered our flight. There may be another way out of the cave, and, if so, he'll stop at nothing to get us. See if you can stand, but keep your head low. There's a low roof of rock above us."

"There's water," said Tommy, listening to the roar of a torrent that seemed to be rushing past them.

"It's a stream, and I believe these shells will float and bear our weight. We've got to try. We've got to put everything to the touch now, Tommy. I'm going to lay Haidia on one of the shells, poor girl, and start her off. Then I'll follow, and you can bring up the rear."

"I'm with you," said Tommy, getting upon his feet, and uttering an exclamation of pain as, forgetful of Dodd's injunction, he let his head strike the rock roof overhead.

In the darkness he felt the outlines of his beetle-shell lying beside the torrent. He could hear Dodd in front of him, grunting as he raised Haidia's unconscious form in his arms and deposited her in her shell.

Tommy got his own shell into the stream, and held it there as the waters swirled around it.

"Ready?" he heard Dodd call.

Before he could answer, there sounded from not far away, yet strangely muffled by the rocks, Bram's bellow of fury. Bram was evidently fully drugged and beside himself. Inarticulate threats came floating through the rocky chamber.

"Bram seems to have lost his head temporarily," called Dodd, laughing. "A madman, Tommy. He insists that the marsupial lion—"

"Yes, I heard you telling him about it," answered Tommy. "You handed it to him straight. However, more about the marsupial lion later. I'm ready."

"Then let 'er go," called Dodd, and his words were

swallowed up by the sound of the hollow shell striking against the rocky bank as he launched his strange craft into the water.

Tommy set one foot into the hollow of his shell, and let himself go.

Instantly the shell shot forward with fearful velocity. It was all Tommy could do to balance himself, for it seemed more unstable than a canoe. Once or twice he thought he heard Dodd shouting ahead of him, but his cries were drowned in the rush of the torrent.

Suddenly a light appeared in the distance. Tommy thought it was another of the petroleum fountains, and his heart seemed to stand still. But then he gave a gasp of relief. It was a cluster of luminous fungi, ten or twelve feet tall, emitting a glow equal to that of a dozen 40-watt electric bulbs.

By that infernal light Tommy could see that the stream curved sharply. It was about fifty feet in width, and the low rock roof had receded to some fifteen feet overhead. Instead of a tunnel, there was nothing on

either side of them but a vast tract of marshy ground thinly coated with the red grass.

As Tommy looked, he saw the shell that carried the unconscious body of Haidia strike the bank beside the phosphorescent growth. He could see the girl lying in the hollow of the shell, as pale as death, her eyes closed. Dodd was close behind. As the swirl of the current caught his shell, he turned to shout a warning to Tommy.

And Tommy noticed a singular thing, of which his sense of balance had already warned him, though he had hardly given conscious thought to the matter. *The river was running up-hill!*

Of course it was, since the center of gravity was in the shell of the earth, and not in the center!

But, again, the shell of the earth was under their feet!

Then Tommy hit on the solution to the problem. If the river was running up-hill, that meant that they must be near the exterior of the earth. In other words, they

had passed the center of gravity: they must be within a mile or so of the exit from Submundia!

Tommy was about to shout his discovery to Dodd when his shell grounded beside the two others, at the base of the clump of fungi.

Huge, straight, hollow stems they were, with mushroom caps, and, like all fungi, fly-blown, for Tommy could see worms nearly a foot in length crawling in and out of the porous stalks. The stench from the growth was nauseating and overpowering, utterly sickening.

"Push off and let's get out of here!" Tommy called to Dodd, who was balancing his shell against the bank, and trying to peer into Haidia's face.

At that moment he caught sight of something that made his blood turn cold!

It was an insect fully fifteen feet in height, three times that of a beetle, lurking among the fungi. He saw a hugely elongated neck, a three-cornered head with a

pair of tentacles, and two pairs of legs as long as a giraffe's. But what gave the added touch of horror was that the monster, balancing itself on its hind legs, had its forelegs extended in the attitude of one holding a prayer-book!

That attitude of devotion was so terrible that Tommy uttered a wild cry of terror. At the same time another cry broke from Dodd's lips.

"God, a praying mantis!" he shouted, struggling madly to push off his shell and Haidia's.

The next moment, as if shot from a catapult, the hideous monster launched itself into the air straight toward them.

Chapter 7: Through the Inferno

Fortunately, the monster miscalculated its leap. The huge legs, whirling through the air, came within a few inches of Tommy's head, but passed over him, and the mantis plunged into the stream. Instantly the water was alive with leaping things with faces of such grotesque horror that Tommy sat paralyzed in his rocking shell, unable to avert his eyes.

Things no more than a foot or two in length, to judge from the slender, eel-like bodies that leaped into the air, but things with catfish heads and tentacles, and eyes waving on stalks; things with clawlike appendages to their ventral fins, and mouths that widened to fearful size, so that the whole head seemed to disappear above them, disclosing fangs like wolves'. Instantly the water was churned into phosphorescent fire as they precipitated themselves upon the struggling mantis, whose enormous form, extending halfway from shore to shore, was covered with the river monsters, gnawing, rending, tearing.

Luckily the struggles of the dying monster carried it downstream instead of up. In a few moments the immediate danger was past. And suddenly Haidia awoke, sat up.

"Where are we?" she cried. "Oh, I can see! I can see! Something has burned away from my eyes! I know this place. A wise man of my people once came here, and returned to tell of it. We must go on. Soon we shall be safe on the wide river. But there is another way that leads to here. We must go on! We must go on!"

Even as she spoke they heard the distant rasping of the beetle-legs. And before the shells were well in mid-current they saw the beetle horde coming round the bend; in the front of them Bram, reclining on his shell couch, and drawn by the eight trained beetles.

Bram saw the fugitives, and a roar of ironic mirth broke from his lips, resounding high above the strident rasping of the beetle-legs, and roaring over the marshes.

"I've got you, Dodd and Travers," he bellowed, as the trained beetles hovered above the shell canoes. "You thought you were clever, but you're at my mercy. Now's your last chance, Dodd. I'll save you still if you'll submit to me, if you'll admit that there were fossil monotremes before the pleistocene epoch. Come, it's so simple! Say it after me: 'The marsupial lion—'"

"You go to hell!" yelled Dodd, nearly upsetting his shell as he shook his fist at his enemy.

High above the rasping sound came Bram's shrill whistle. Just audible to human ears, though probably sounding like the roar of thunder to those of the beetles, there was no need to wonder what it was.

It was the call to slaughter.

Like a black cloud the beetles shot forward. A serried phalanx covered the two men and the girl, hovering a few feet overhead, the long legs dangling to within arm's reach. And a terrible cry of fear broke from Haidia's lips.

Suddenly Tommy remembered Bram's cigarette-lighter. He pulled it from his pocket and ignited it.

Small as the flame was, it was actinically much more powerful than the brighter phosphorescence of the fungi behind them. The beetle-cloud overhead parted. The strident sound was[231] broken into a confused buzzing as the terrified, blinded beetles plopped into the stream.

None of them, fortunately, fell into either of the three shells, but the mass of struggling monsters in the water was hardly less formidable to the safety of the occupants than that menacing cloud overhead.

"Get clear!" Tommy yelled to Dodd, trying to help the shell along with his hands.

He heard Bram's cry of baffled rage, and, looking backward, could not refrain from a laugh of triumph. Bram's trained steeds had taken fright and overset him. Bram had fallen into the red mud beside the stream, from which he was struggling up, plastered from head to feet, and shaking his fists and evidently

cursing, though his words could not be heard.

"How about your marsupial lion now, Bram?" yelled Dodd. "No monotremes before the pleistocene! D'you get that? That's my slogan now and for ever more!"

Bram shrieked and raved, and seemed to be inciting the beetles to a renewed assault. The air was still thick with them, but Tommy was waving the cigarette-lighter in a flaming arc, which cleared the way for them.

Then suddenly came disaster. The flame went out! Tommy closed the lighter with a snap and opened it. In vain. In his excitement he must have spilled all the contents, for it would not catch.

Bram saw and yelled derision. The beetle-cloud was thickening. Tommy, now abreast of his companions on the widening stream, saw the imminent end.

And then once more fate intervened. For, leaping through the air out of the places where they had lain concealed, six mantises launched themselves at their

beetle prey.

Those awful bounds of the long-legged monsters, the scourges of the insect world, carried them clear from one bank to the other—fortunately for the occupants of the shells. In an instant the beetle-cloud dissolved. And it had all happened in a few seconds. Before Dodd or Tommy had quite taken in the situation, the mantises, each carrying a victim in its grooved legs, had vanished like the beetles. There was no sign of Bram. The three were alone upon the face of the stream, which went swirling upward into renewed darkness.

Tommy saw Dodd bend toward Haidia as she lay on her shell couch. He heard the sound of a noisy kiss. And he lay back in the hollow of his shell, with the feeling that nothing that could happen in the future could be worse than what they had passed through.

Days went by, days when the sense of dawning freedom filled their hearts with hope. Haidia told Dodd and Tommy that, according to the legends of her people, the river ran into the world from which

they had been driven by the floods, ages before.

There had been no further signs of Bram or the beetle horde, and Dodd and Tommy surmised that it had been disorganized by the attack of the mantises, and that Bram was engaged in regaining his control over it. But neither of them believed that the respite would be a long one, and for that reason they rested ashore only for the briefest intervals, just long enough to snatch a little sleep, and to eat some of the shrimps that Haidia was adept at finding—or to pull some juicy fruit surreptitiously from a tree.

Incidents there were, nevertheless, during those days. For hours their shells were followed by a school of the luminous river monsters, which, nevertheless, made no attempt to attack them. And once, hearing a cry from Haidia, as she was gathering shrimps, Dodd ran forward to see her battling furiously with a luminous scorpion,[232] eight feet in length, that had sprung at her from its lurking place behind a pear shrub.

Dodd succeeded in stunning and dispatching the monster without suffering any injury from it, but the

strain of the period was beginning to tell on all of them. Worst of all, they seemed to have left all the luminous vegetation behind them, and were entering a region of almost total darkness, in which Haidia had to be their eyes.

Something had happened to the girl's sight in the journey over the petrol spring. As a matter of fact, the third, or nictitating membrane, which the humans of Submundia possessed, in common with birds, had been burned away. Haidia could see as well as ever in the dark, but she could bear more light than formerly as well. Unobtrusively she assumed command of the party. She anticipated their wants, dug shrimps in the darkness, and fed Tommy and Dodd with her own hands.

"God, what a girl!" breathed Dodd to his friend. "I've always had the reputation of being a woman-hater, Tommy, but once I get that girl to civilization I'm going to take her to the nearest Little Church Around the Corner in record time."

"I wish you luck, old man, I'm sure," answered

Tommy. Dodd's words did not seem strange to him. Civilization was growing very remote to him, and Broadway seemed like a memory of some previous incarnation.

The river was growing narrower again, and swifter, too. On the last day, or night, of their journey—though they did not know that it was to be their last—it swirled so fiercely that it threatened every moment to overset their beetle-shells. Suddenly Tommy began to feel giddy. He gripped the side of his shell with his hand.

"Tommy, we're going round!" shouted Dodd in front of him.

There was no longer any doubt of it. The shells were revolving in a vortex of rushing, foaming water.

"Hadia!" they shouted.

The girl's voice came back thickly across the roaring torrent. The circles grew smaller. Tommy knew that he was being sucked nearer and nearer to the edge of

some terrific whirlpool in that inky blackness. Now he could no longer hear Dodd's shouts, and the shell was tipping so that he could feel the water rushing along the edge of it. But for the exercise of centrifugal force he would have been flung from his perilous seat, for he was leaning inward at an angle of forty-five degrees.

Then suddenly his progress was arrested. He felt the shell being drawn to the shore. He leaped out, and Haidia's strong hands dragged the shell out of the torrent, while Tommy sank down, gasping.

"What's the matter?" he heard Dodd demanding.

"There is no more river," said Haidia calmly. "It goes into a hole in the ground. So much I have heard from the wise men of my people. They say that it is near such a place that they fled from the flood in years gone by."

"Then we're near safety," shouted Tommy. "That river must emerge as a stream somewhere in the upper world, Dodd. I wonder where the road lies."

"There is a road here," came Haidia's calm voice. "Let us put on our shells again, since who knows whether there may not be beetles here."

"Did you ever see such a girl as that?" demanded Dodd ecstatically. "First she saves our lives, and then she thinks of everything. Good lord, she'll remember my meals, and to wind my watch for me, and—and—"

But Haidia's voice, some distance ahead, interrupted Dodd's soliloquy, and, hoisting the beetle-shells upon their backs, they started along the rough trail that they could feel with their feet over the stony ground. It[233] was still as dark as pitch, but soon they found themselves traveling up a sunken way that was evidently a dry watercourse. And now and again Haidia's reassuring voice would come from in front of them.

The road grew steeper. There could no longer be any doubt that they were ascending toward the surface of the earth. But even the weight of the beetle-shells and the steepness could not account for the feeling of intense weakness that took possession of them. Time

and again they stopped, panting.

"We must be very near the surface, Dodd," said Tommy. "We've surely passed the center of gravity. That's what makes it so difficult."

"Come on," Haidia said in her quiet voice, stretching out her hand through the darkness. And for very shame they had to follow her.

On and on, hour after hour, up the steep ascent, resting only long enough to make them realize their utter fatigue. On because Haidia was leading them, and because in the belief that they were about to leave that awful land behind them their desires lent new strength to their limbs continuously.

Suddenly Haidia uttered a fearful cry. Her ears had caught what became apparent to Dodd and Jimmy several seconds later.

Far down in the hollow of the earth, increased by the echoes that came rumbling up, they heard the distant, strident rasp of the beetle swarm.

Then it was Dodd's turn to support Haidia and whisper consolation in her ears. No thought of resting now. If they were to be overwhelmed at last by the monsters, they meant to be overwhelmed in the upper air.

It was growing insufferably hot. Blasts of air, as if from a furnace, began to rush up and down past them. And the trail was growing steeper still, and slippery as glass.

"What is it, Jim?" Tommy panted, as Dodd, leaving Haidia for a moment, came back to him.

"I'd say lava," Dodd answered. "If only one could see something! I don't know how she finds her way. My impression is that we are coming out through the interior of an extinct volcano."

"But where are there volcanoes in the south polar regions?" inquired Tommy.

"There are Mount Erebus and Mount Terror, in South Victoria Land, active volcanoes discovered by Sir

James Ross in 1841, and again by Borchgrevink, in 1899. If that's where we're coming out—well, Tommy, we're doomed, because it's the heart of the polar continent. We might as well turn back."

"But we won't turn back," said Tommy. "I'm damned if we do."

"We're damned if we don't," said Dodd.

"Come along please!" sang Haidia's voice high up the slope.

They struggled on. And now a faint luminosity was beginning to penetrate that infernal darkness. The rasping of the beetle-legs, too, was no longer audible. Perhaps they had thrown Bram off their track! Perhaps in the darkness he had not known which way they had gone after leaving the whirlpool!

That thought encouraged them to a last effort. They pushed their flagging limbs up, upward through an inferno of heated air. Suddenly Dodd uttered a yell and pointed upward.

"God!" ejaculated Tommy. Then he seized Dodd in his arms and nearly crushed him. For high above them, a pin-point in the black void, they saw—a star!

They were almost at the earth's surface!

One more effort, and suddenly the ground seemed to give beneath them. They breathed the outer air, and went sliding down a chute of sand, and stopped, half buried, at the bottom.

Chapter 8: Recaptured

"Where are we?" each demanded of the other, as they staggered out.

It was a moonless night, and the air was chill, but they were certainly nowhere near the polar regions, for there was no trace of snow to be seen anywhere. All about them was sand, with here and there a spiny shrub standing up stiff and erect and solitary.

When they had disengaged themselves from the clinging sand they could see that they were apparently in the hollow of a vast crater, that must have been half a mile in circumference. It was low and worn down to an elevation of not more than two or three hundred feet, and evidently the volcano that had thrown it up had been extinct for millennia.

"Water!" gasped Dodd.

They looked all about them. They could see no signs of a spring anywhere, and both were parched with thirst after their terrific climb.

"We must find water, Haidia," said Tommy. "Why, what's the matter?"

Haidia was pointing upward at the starry heaven, and shivering with fear. "Eyes!" she cried. "Big beetles waiting for us up there!"

"No, no, Haidia," Dodd explained. "Those are stars. They are worlds—places where people live."

"Will you take me up there?" asked Haidia.

"No, this is our world," said Dodd. "And by and by the sun will rise, that's a big ball of fire up there. He watches over the world and gives us light and warmth. Don't be afraid. I'll take care of you."

"Haidia is not afraid with Jimmydodd to take care of her," replied the girl with dignity. "Haidia smells water—over there." She pointed across one side of the crater.

"There we'd better hurry," said Tommy, "because I can't hold out much longer."

The three scrambled over the soft sand, which sucked in their feet to the ankle at every step. It was with the greatest difficulty that they succeeded in reaching the crater's summit, low though it was. Then Dodd uttered a cry, and pointed. In front of them extended a long pool of water, with a scrubby growth around the edges.

The ground was firmer here, and they hurried toward it. Tommy was the first to reach it. He lay down on his face and drank eagerly. He had taken in a quart before he discovered that the water was saline.

At the same time Dodd uttered an exclamation of disgust. Haidia, too, after sipping a little of the fluid, had stood up, chattering excitedly in her own language.

But she was not chattering about the water. She was pointing toward the scrub. "Men there!" she cried. "Men like you and Tommy, Jimmydodd."

Tommy and Dodd looked at each other, the water already forgotten in their excitement at Haidia's

information, which neither of them doubted.

Brave as she was, the girl now hung back behind Dodd, letting the two men take precedence of her. The water, saline as it was, had partly quenched their thirst. They felt their strength reviving.

And it was growing light. In the east the sky was already flecked with yellow pink. They felt a thrill of intense excitement at the prospect of meeting others of their kind.

"Where do you think we are?" asked Tommy.

Dodd stopped to look at a shrub that was growing near the edge of the pool. "I don't think, I know, Tommy," he answered. "This is wattle."

"Yes?"

"We're somewhere in the interior regions of the Australian continent—and that's not going to help us much."

"Over there—over there," panted Haidia. "Hold me, Jimmydodd. I can't see. Ah, this terrible light!"

She screwed her eyelids tightly together to shut out the pale light of dawn. The men had already discovered that the third membrane had been burned away.

"We must get her out of here," whispered Dodd to Tommy. "Somewhere where it's dark, before the sun rises. Let's go back to the entrance of the crater."

But Haidia, her arm extended, persisted, "Over there! Over there!"

Suddenly a spear came whirling out of a growth of wattle beside the pool. It whizzed past Tommy's face and dropped into the sand behind. Between the trunks of the wattles they could see the forms of a party of blackfellows, watching them intently.

Tommy held up his arms and moved forward with a show of confidence that he was far from feeling. After what he had escaped in the underworld he was in no

mood to be massacred now.

But the blacks were evidently not hostile. It was probable that the spear had not been aimed to kill. At the sight of the two white men, and the white woman, they came forward doubtfully, then more fearlessly, shouting in their language. In another minute Tommy and Dodd were the center of a group of wondering savages.

Especially Haidia. Three or four gins, or black women, had crept out of the scrub, and were already examining her with guttural cries, and fingering the hair garment that she wore.

"Water!" said Tommy, pointing to his throat, and then to the pool, with a frown of disgust.

The blackfellows grinned, and led the three a short distance to a place where a large hollow had been scooped in the sandy floor of the desert. It was full of water, perfectly sweet to the taste. The three drank gratefully.

Suddenly the edge of the sun appeared above the horizon, gilding the sand with gold. The sunlight fell upon the three, and Haidia uttered a terrible cry of distress. She dropped upon the sand, her hands pressed to her eyes convulsively. Tommy and Dodd dragged her into the thickest part of the scrub, where she lay moaning.

They contrived bandages from the remnants of their clothing, and these, damped with cold water, and bound over the girl's eyes, alleviated her suffering somewhat. Meanwhile the blackfellows had prepared a meal of roast opossum. After their long diet of shrimps, it tasted like ambrosia to the two men.

Much to their surprise, Haidia seemed to enjoy it too. The three squatted in the scrub among the friendly blacks, discussing their situation.

"These fellows will save us," said Dodd. "It may be that we're quite near the coast, but, any way, they'll stick to us, even if only out of curiosity. They'll take us somewhere. But as soon as we get Haidia to safety we'll have to go back along our trail. We mustn't lose

our direction. Suppose I was laughed at when I get back, called a liar! I tell you, we've got to have something to show, to prove my statements, before I can persuade anybody to fit out an expedition into Submundia. Even those three beetle-shells that we dropped in the crater won't be conclusive evidence for the type of mind that sits in the chairs of science to-day. And, speaking of that, we must get those blacks to carry those shells for us. I tell you, nobody will believe—"

"What's that?" cried Tommy sharply, as a rasping sound rose above the cries of the frightened blacks.

But there was no need to ask. Out of the crater two enormous beetles were winging their way toward them, two beetles larger than any that they had seen.

Fully seven feet in length, they were circling about each other, apparently engaged in a vicious battle.

The fearful beaks stabbed at the flesh beneath the shells, and they alternately stabbed and drew back, all the while approaching the party, which watched

them, petrified with terror.

It was evident that the monsters had no conception of the presence of humans. Blinded by the sun, only one thing could have induced them to leave the dark depths of Submundia. That was the mating instinct. The beetles were evidently rival leaders of some swarm, engaged in a duel to the death.

Round and round they went in a dizzy maze, stabbing and thrusting, jaws closing on flesh, until they dropped, close-locked in battle, not more than twenty feet from the little party of blacks and whites, both squirming in the agonies of death.

"I don't think that necessarily means that the swarm is on our trail," said Tommy, a little later, as the three stood beside the shells that they had discarded.

"Those two were strays, lost from the swarm and maddened by the mating instinct. Still, it might be as well to wear these things for a while, in case they do follow us."

"You're right," answered Dodd, as he placed one of

the shells around Haidia. "We've got to get this little lady to civilization, and we've got to protect our lives in order to give this great new knowledge to the world. If we are attacked, you must sacrifice your life for me, Tommy, so that I can carry back the news."

"Righto!" answered Tommy with alacrity. "You bet I will, Jim."

The glaring sun of mid-afternoon was shining down upon the desert, but Haidia was no longer in pain. It was evident that she was fast becoming accustomed to the sunlight, though she still kept her eyes screwed up tightly, and had to be helped along by Dodd and Jimmy. In high good humor the three reached the encampment, to find that the blacks were feasting on the dead beetles, while the two eldest members of the party had proudly donned the shells.

It was near sunset before they finally started. Dodd and Tommy had managed to make it clear to them that they wished to reach civilization, but how near this was there was, of course, no means of determining. They noted, however, that the party

started in a southerly direction.

"I should say," said Dodd, "that we are in South Australia, probably three or four hundred miles from the coast. We've got a long journey before us, but these blackfellows will know how to procure food for us."

They certainly knew how to get water, for, just as it began to grow dark, when the three were already tormented by thirst, they stopped at what seemed a mere hollow among the stones and boulders that strewed the face of the desert, and scooped away the sand, leaving a hole which quickly filled with clear, cold water of excellent taste.

After which they made signs that they were to camp there for the night. The moon was riding high in the sky. As it grew dark, Haidia opened her eyes, saw the luminary, and uttered an exclamation, this time not of fear, but of wonder.

"Moon," said Dodd. "That's all right, girl. She watches over the night, as the sun does over the day."

"Haidia likes the moon better than the sun," said the girl wistfully. "But the moon not strong enough to keep away the beetles."

"If I was you, I'd forget about the beetles, Haidia," said Dodd. "They won't come out of that hole in the ground. You'll never see them again."

And, as he spoke, they heard a familiar rasping sound far in the distance.

"How the wind blows," said Tommy, desperately resolved not to believe his ears. "I think a storm's coming up."

But Haidia, with a scream of fear, was clinging to Dodd, and the blacks were on their feet, spears and boomerangs in their hands, looking northward.

Out of that north a little black cloud was gathering. A cloud that spread gradually, as a thunder-cloud, until it covered a good part of the sky. And still more of the sky, and still more. All the while that faint, distant rasping was audible, but it did not increase in volume.

It was as if the beetles had halted until the full number of the swarm had come up out of the crater.

Then the cloud, which by now covered half the sky, began to take geometric form. It grew square, the ragged edges seemed to trim themselves away, streaks of light shot through it at right angles, as if it was marshaling itself into companies.

The doomed men and the girl stood perfectly still, staring at that phenomenon. They knew that only a miracle could save them. They did not even speak, but Haidia clung more tightly to Dodd's arm.

Then suddenly the cloud spread upward and covered the face of the moon.

"Well, this is good-by, Tommy," said Dodd, gripping his friend's hand. "God, I wish I had a revolver, or a knife!" He looked at Haidia.

Suddenly the rasping became a whining shriek. A score of enormous beetles, the advance guards of the army, zoomed out of the darkness into a ray of

straggling moonlight. Shrieking, the blacks, who had watched the approaching swarm perfectly immobile, threw away the two shells and bolted.

"Good Lord," Dodd shouted, "did you see the color of their shells, Tommy?" Even in that moment the scientific observer came uppermost in him. "Those red edges? They must be young ones, Tommy. It's the new brood! No wonder Bram stayed behind! He was waiting for them to hatch! The new brood! We're doomed—doomed! All my work wasted!"

The blackfellows did not get very far. A hundred yards from the place where they started to run they dropped, their bodies hidden beneath the clustering monsters, their screams cut short as those frightful beaks sought their throats, and those jaws crunched through flesh and bone.

Circling around Dodd, Tommy, and Haidia, as if puzzled by their appearance, the beetles kept up a continuous, furious droning that sounded like the roar of Niagara mixed with the shrieking of a thousand sirens. The moon was completely hidden, and only a

dim, nebulous light showed the repulsive monsters as they flew within a few feet of the heads of the fugitives. The stench was overpowering.

But suddenly a ray of white light shot through the darkness, and, with a changed note, just perceptible to the ears of the two men, but doubtless of the greatest significance to the beetles, the swarm fled apart to right and left, leaving a clear lane, through which appeared—Bram, reclining on his shell-couch above his eight trained beetle steeds!

Hovering overhead, the eight huge monsters dropped lightly to the ground beside the three. Bram sat up, a vicious grin upon his twisted face. In his hand he held a large electric bulb, its sides sheathed in a roughly carved wooden frame; the wire was attached to a battery behind him.

"Well met, my friends!" he shouted exultantly. "I owe you more thanks than I can express for having so providentially left the electrical equipment of your plane undamaged after you crashed at the entrance to Submundia. I had a hunch about it—and the hunch

worked!"

He grinned more malevolently as he looked from one man to the other.

"You've run your race," he said. "But I'm going to have a little fun with you before you die. I'm going to use you as an object lesson. You'll find it out in a little while."

"Go ahead, go ahead, Bram," Dodd grinned back at him. "Just a few mil[238]lion years ago, and you were a speck of protoplasm—in that pre-pleistocene age—swimming among the invertebrate crustaceans that characterized that epoch."

"Invertebrates and monotremes, Dodd," said Bram, almost wistfully. "The mammals were already existent on the earth, as you know—" Suddenly he broke off, as he realized that Dodd was spoofing him. A yell of execration broke from his lips. He uttered a high whistle, and instantly the whiplike lashes of a hundred beetles whizzed through the darkness and remained poised over Dodd's head.

"Not even the marsupial lion, Bram," grinned Dodd, undismayed. "Go ahead, go ahead, but I'll not die with a lie upon my lips!"

Chapter 9: The Trail of Death

"There's sure some sort of hoodoo on these Antarctic expeditions, Wilson," said the city editor of *The Daily Record* to the star rewrite man. He glanced through the hastily typed report that had come through on the wireless set erected on the thirty-sixth story of the Record Building. "Tommy Travers gone, eh? And James Dodd, too! There'll be woe and wailing along the Great White Way to-night when this news gets out. They say that half the chorus girls in town considered themselves engaged to Tommy. Nice fellow, too! Always did like him!"

"Queer, that curtain of fog that seems to lie on the actual site of the south pole," he continued, glancing over the report again. "So Storm thinks that Tommy crashed in it, and that it's a million to one against their ever finding his remains. What's this about beetles? Shells of enormous prehistoric beetles found by Tommy and Dodd! That'll make good copy, Wilson. Let's play that up. Hand it to Jones, and tell him to scare up a catching headline or two."

He beckoned to the boy who was hurrying toward his desk, a flimsy in his hand, glanced through it, and tossed it toward Wilson.

"What do they think this is, April Fool's Day?" he asked. "I'm surprised that the International Press should fall for such stuff as that!"

"Why, to-morrow is the first of April!" exclaimed Wilson, tossing back the cable dispatch with a contemptuous laugh.

"Well, it won't do the I. P. much good to play those tricks on their subscribers," said the city editor testily. "I'm surprised, to say the least. I guess their Adelaide correspondent has gone off his head or something. Using poor Travers's name, too! Of course that fellow didn't know he was dead, but still..."

That was how *The Daily Record* missed being the first to give out certain information that was to stagger the world. The dispatch, which had evidently outrun an earlier one, was as follows:

ADELAIDE, South Australia, March 31.— Further telegraphic communications arriving almost continuously from Settler's Station, signed by Thomas Travers, member of Travers Antarctic Expedition, who claims to have penetrated earth's interior at south pole and to have come out near Victoria Desert. Travers states that swarm of prehistoric beetles, estimated at two trillion, and as large as men, with shells impenetrable by rifle bullets, now besieging Settler's Station, where he and Dodd and Haidia, woman of subterranean race whom they brought away, are shut up in telegraph office. Bram, former member of Greystoke Expedition, said to be in charge of swarm, with intention of obliterating human race. Every living thing at Settler's Station destroyed, and swarm moving south.

It was a small-town paper a hundred miles from New York that took a chance on publishing this report from the International Press, in spite of frantic efforts on the parts of the head office to recall it after it had

been transmitted. This paper published the account as an April Fool's Day joke, though later it took to itself the credit for having believed it. But by the time April Fool's Day dawned all the world knew that the account was, if anything, an under-estimate of the fearful things that were happening "down under."

It was known now that the swarm of monsters had originated in the Great Victoria Desert, one of the worst stretches of desolation in the world, situated in the south-east corner of Western Australia. Their numbers were incalculable. Wimbush, the aviator, who was attempting to cross the continent from east to west, reported afterward that he had flown for four days, skirting the edge of the swarm, and that the whole of that time they were moving in the same direction, a thick cloud that left a trail of dense darkness on earth beneath them, like the path of an eclipse. Wimbush escaped them only because he had a ceiling of twenty thousand feet, to which apparently the beetles could not soar.

And this swarm was only about one-fourth of the whole number of the monsters. This was the swarm

that was moving westward, and subsequently totally destroyed all living things in Kalgoorlie, Coolgardie, Perth, and all the coastal cities of Western Australia.

Ships were found drifting in the Indian Ocean, totally destitute of crews and passengers; not even their skeletons were found, and it was estimated that the voracious monsters had carried them away bodily, devoured them in the air, and dropped the remains into the water.

All the world knows now how the sea elephant herd on Kerguelen Island was totally destroyed, and of the giant shells that were found lying everywhere on the deserted beaches, in positions that showed the monsters had in the end devoured one another.

Mauritius was the most westerly point reached by a fraction of the swarm. A little over twenty thousand of the beetles reached that lovely island, by count of the shells afterward, and all the world knows now of the desperate and successful fight that the inhabitants waged against them. Men and women, boys and girls, blacks and whites, finding that the devils were

invulnerable against rifle fire, sallied forth boldly with knives and choppers, and laid down a life for a life.

On the second day after their appearance, the main swarm, a trillion and a half strong, reached the line of the transcontinental railway, and moved eastward into South Australia, traveling, it was estimated, at the rate of two hundred miles an hour. By the next morning they were in Adelaide, a city of nearly a quarter of a million people. By nightfall every living thing in Adelaide and the suburbs had been eaten, except for a few who succeeded in hiding in walled-up cellars, or in the surrounding marshes.

That night the swarm was on the borders of New South Wales and Victoria, and moving in two divisions toward Melbourne and Sydney.

The northern half, it was quickly seen, was flying "wild," with no particular objective, moving in a solid cohort two hundred miles in length, and devouring game, stock, and humans indiscriminately. It was the southern division, numbering perhaps a trillion, that was under command of Bram, and aimed at

destroying Melbourne as Adelaide had been destroyed.

Bram, with his eight beetle steeds, was by this time known and execrated throughout the world. He was pictured as Anti-Christ, and the fulfilment of the prophecies of the Rock of Revelations.

And all this while—or, rather, until the telegraph wires were cut—broken, it was discovered later, by perching beetles—Thomas Travers was sending out messages from his post at Settler's Station.

Soon it was known that prodigious creatures were following in the wake of the devastating horde. Mantises, fifteen feet in height, winged things like pterodactyls, longer than bombing airplanes, followed, preying on the stragglers. But the main bodies never halted, and the inroads that the destroyers made on their numbers were insignificant.

Before the swarm reached Adelaide the Commonwealth Government had taken action. Troops had been called out, and all the available airplanes in

the country had been ordered to assemble at Broken Hill, New South Wales, a strategic point commanding the approaches to Sydney and Melbourne. Something like four hundred airplanes were assembled, with several batteries of anti-aircraft guns that had been used in the Great War. Every amateur aviator in Australia was on the spot, with machines ranging from tiny Moths to Handley-Pages—anything that could fly.

Nocturnal though the beetles had been, they no longer feared the light of the sun. In fact, it was ascertained later that they were blind. An opacity had formed over the crystalline lens of the eye. Blind, they were no less formidable than with their sight. They existed only to devour, and their numbers made them irresistible, no matter which way they turned.

As soon as the vanguard of the dark cloud was sighted from Broken Hill, the airplanes went aloft. Four hundred planes, each armed with machine guns, dashed into the serried hosts, drumming out volleys of lead. In a long line, extending nearly to the limits of the beetle formation, thus giving each aviator all the

room he needed, the planes gave battle.

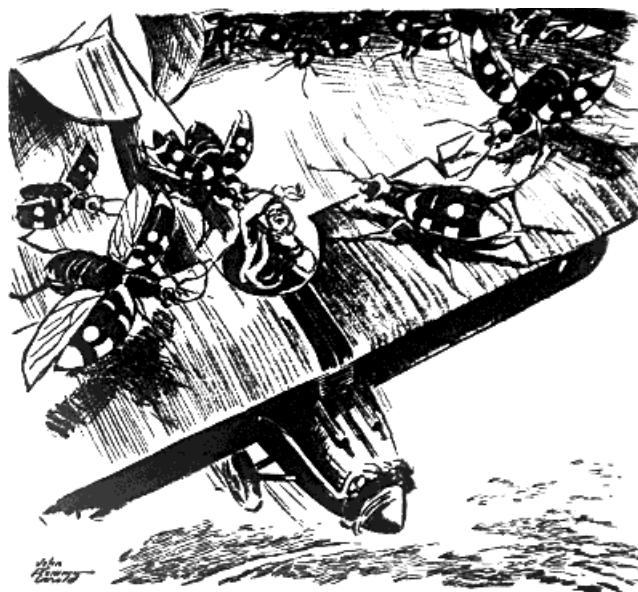
The first terror that fell upon the airmen was the discovery that, even at close range, the machine gun bullets failed to penetrate the shells. The force of the impact whirled the beetles around, drove them together in bunches, sent them groping with weaving tentacles through the air—but that was all. On the main body of the invaders no impression was made whatever.

The second terror was the realization that the swarm, driven down here and there from an altitude of several hundred feet, merely resumed their progress on the ground, in a succession of gigantic leaps. Within a few minutes, instead of presenting an inflexible barrier, the line of airplanes was badly broken, each plane surrounded by swarms of the monsters.

Then Bram was seen. And that was the third terror, the sight of the famous beetle steeds, four pairs abreast, with Bram reclining like a Roman emperor upon the surface of the shells. It is true, Bram had no

inclination to risk his own life in battle. At the first sight of the aviators he dodged into the thick of the swarm, where no bullet could reach him. Bram managed to transmit an order, and the beetles drew together.

Some thought afterward that it was by thought transference he effected this maneuver, for instantly the beetles, which had hitherto flown in loose order, became a solid wall, a thousand feet in height, closing in on the planes. The propellers struck them and snapped short, and as the planes went weaving down, the hideous monsters leaped into the cockpits and began their abominable meal.



[Image description start: A black and white

illustration of a scene from the short novel, *The Beetle Hoard*, by Victor Rousseau, portraying a scene where an old-fashioned, single-pilot airplane is attacked by a swarm of giant, spotted beetles. Image description end.]

Not a single plane came back. Planes and skeletons, and here and there a shell of a dead beetle, itself completely devoured, were all that was found afterward.

The gunners stayed at their posts till the last moment, firing round after round of shell and shrapnel, with insignificant results. Their skeletons were found not twenty paces from their guns—where the Gunners' Monument now stands.

Half an hour after the flight had first been sighted the news was being radioed to Sydney, Melbourne, and all other Australian cities, advising instant flight to sea as the only chance of safety. That radio message was cut short—and men listened and shuddered. After that came the crowding aboard all craft in the harbors, the tragedies of the *Eustis*, the *All Australia*,

the *Sephoris*, sunk at their moorings. The innumerable sea tragedies. The horde of fugitives that landed in New Zealand. The reign of terror when the mob got out of hand, the burning of Melbourne, the sack of Sydney.

And south and eastward, like a resistless flood, the beetle swarm came pouring. Well had Bram boasted that he would make the earth a desert!

A hundred miles of poisoned carcasses of sheep, extended outside Sydney's suburbs, gave the first promise of success. Long mounds of beetle shells testified to the results; moreover, the beetles that fed on the carcasses of their fellows, were in turn poisoned and died. But this was only a drop in the bucket. What counted was that the swift advance was slowing down. As if exhausted by their efforts, or else satiated with food, the beetles were doing what the soldiers did.

They were digging in!

Twenty-four miles from Sydney, eighteen outside

Melbourne, the advance was stayed.

Volunteers who went out from those cities reported that the beetles seemed to be resting in long trenches that they had excavated, so that only their shells appeared above ground. Trees were covered with clinging beetles, every wall, every house was invisible beneath the beetle armor.

Australia had a respite. Perhaps only for a night or day, but still time to draw breath, time to consider, time for the shiploads of fugitives to get farther from the continent that had become a shambles.

And then the cry went up, not only from Australia, but from all the world, "Get Travers!"

Chapter 10: At Bay

Bram put his fingers to his mouth and whistled, a shrill whistle, yet audible to Dodd, Tommy, and Haidia. Instantly three pairs of beetles appeared out of the throng. Their tentacles went out, and the two men and the girl found themselves hoisted separately

upon the backs of the pairs. Next moment they were flying side by side, high in the air above the surrounding swarm.

They could see one another, but it was impossible for them to make their voices heard above the rasping of the beetles' legs. Hours went by, while the moon crossed the sky and dipped toward the horizon.

Tommy knew that the moon would set about the hour of dawn. And the stars were already beginning to pale when he saw a line of telegraph poles, then two lines of shining metals, then a small settlement of stone and brick houses.

Tommy was not familiar with the geography of Australia, but he knew this must be the transcontinental line.

Whirling onward, the cloud of beetles suddenly swooped downward. For a moment Tommy could see the frightened occupants of the settlement crowding into the single street, then he shuddered with sick horror as he saw them obliterated by the swarm.

There was no struggle, no attempt at flight or resistance. One moment those forty-odd men were there—the next minute they existed no longer. There was nothing but a swarm of beetles, walking about like men with shells upon their backs.

And now Tommy saw evidences of Bram's devilish control of the swarm. For out of the cloud dropped what seemed to be a phalanx of beetle guards, the military police of beetledom, and, lashing fiercely with their tentacles, they drove back all the swarm that sought to join their companions in their ghoulish feast. There was just so much food and no more; the rest must seek theirs further.

But even beetles, it may be presumed, are not entirely under discipline at all times. The pair of beetles that bore Tommy, suddenly swooped apart, ten or a dozen feet from the ground, and dashed into the thick of the struggling, frenzied mass, flinging their rider to earth.

Tommy struck the soft sand, sat up, half dazed, saw his shell lying a few feet away from him, and retrieved it just as a couple of the monsters came swooping

down at him.

He looked about him. Not far away stood Dodd and Haidia, with their shells on their backs. They recognized Tommy and ran toward him.

Not more than twenty yards away stood the railroad station, with several crates of goods on the platform. Next to it was a substantial house of stone, with the front door open.

Tommy pointed to it, and Dodd understood and shouted something that was lost in the furious buzz of the beetles' wings as they devoured their prey. The three raced for the entrance, gained it unmolested, and closed the door.

There was a key in the door, and it was light enough for them to see a chain, which Dodd pulled into position. There was only one story, and there were three rooms, apparently, with the kitchen. Tommy rushed to the kitchen door, locked it, too, and, with almost super-human efforts, dragged the large iron stove against it. He rushed to the window, but it was a

mere loophole, not large enough to admit a child. Nevertheless, he stood the heavy table on end so that it covered it. Then he ran back.

Dodd had already barricaded the window of the larger room, which was a bed-sitting room, with a heavy wardrobe, and the wooden bedstead, jamming the two pieces sidewise against the wall, so that they could not be forced apart without being demolished. He was now busy in the smaller room, which seemed to be the station-master's office, dragging an iron safe across the floor. But the window was criss-crossed with iron bars, and it was evident that the safe, which was locked, contained at times considerable money, for the window could hardly have been forced save by a charge of nitro-glycerine or dynamite. However, it was against the door that Dodd placed the safe, and he stood back, panting.

"Good," said Haidia. "That will hold them."

The two men looked at her doubtfully. Did Haidia know what she was talking about?

The sun had risen. A long shaft shot into the room. Outside the beetles were still buzzing as they turned over the vestiges of their prey. There were as yet no signs of attack. Suddenly Tommy grasped Dodd's arm.

"Look!" he shouted, pointing to a corner which had been in gloom a moment before.

There was a table there, and on it a telegraphic instrument. Telegraphy had been one of Tommy's hobbies in boyhood. In a moment he was busy at the table.

Dot-dash-dot-dash! Then suddenly outside a furious hum, and the impact of beetle bodies against the front door.

Tommy got up, grinning. That was the first, interrupted message from Tommy that was received.

Through the barred window the three could see the furious efforts of the beetles to force an entrance. But the very tensile strength of the beetle-shells, which rendered them impervious to bullets, required a

laminate construction which rendered them powerless against brick or stone.

Desperately the swarm dashed itself against the walls, until the ground outside was piled high with stunned beetles. Not the faintest impression was made on the defenses.

"Watch them, Jim," said Tom. "I'll go see if the rear's secure."

That thought of his seemed to have been anticipated by the beetles, for as Tommy reached the kitchen the swarm came dashing against door and window, always recoiling. Tommy came back, grinning all over his face.

"You were right, Haidia," he said. "We've held them all right, and the tables are turned on Bram. Also I got a message through, I think," he added to Dodd.

Dash—dot—dash—dot from the instrument. Tommy ran to the table again. Dash—dot went back. For five minutes Tommy labored, while the beetles hammered

now on one door, now on another, now on the windows. Then Tommy got up.

"It was some station down the line," he said. "I've told them, and they're sending a man up here to replace the telegraphist, also a couple of cops. They think I'm crazy. I told them again. That's the best I could do."

"Dodd! Travers! For the last time—let's talk!"

The cloud of beetles seemed to have thinned, for the sun was shining into the room. Bram's voice was perfectly audible, though he himself was invisible; probably he thought it likely that the defenders had obtained firearms.

"Nothing to say to you, Bram," called Dodd. "We've finished our discussion on the monotremes."

"I want you fellows to stand in with me," came Bram's plaintive tones. "It's so lonesome all by one's self, Dodd."

"Ah, you're beginning to find that out, are you?" Dodd

could not resist answering. "You'll be lonelier yet before you're through."

"Dodd, I didn't bring that swarm up here. I swear it. I've been trying to control them from the beginning. I saw what was coming. I believe I can avert this horror, drive them into the sea or something like that. Don't make me desperate, Dodd.

"And listen, old man. About those monotremes—sensible men don't quarrel over things like that. Why can't we agree to differ?"

"Ah, now you're talking, Bram," Dodd answered. "Only you're too late. After what's happened here today, we'll have no truck with you. That's final."

"Damn you," shrieked Bram. "I'll batter down this house. I'll—"

"You'll do nothing, Bram, because you can't," Dodd answered. "Travers has wired full information about your devil-horde, and likewise about you, and all Australia will be prepared to give you a warm

reception when you arrive."

"I tell you I'm invincible," Bram screamed. "In three days Australia will be a ruin, a depopulated desert. In a week, all southern Asia, in three weeks Europe, in two months America."

"You've been taking too many of those pellets, Bram," Dodd answered. "Stand back now! Stand back, wherever you are, or I'll open the door and throw the slops over you."

Bram's screech rose high above the droning of the wings. In another moment the interior of the room had grown as black as night. The rattle of the beetle shells against the four walls of the house was like the clattering of stage thunder.

All through the darkness Dodd could hear the unhurried clicking of the key.

At last the rattling ceased. The sun shone in again. The ground all around the house was packed with fallen beetles, six feet high, a writhing mass that

creaked and clattered as it strove to disengage itself.

Bram's voice once more: "I'm leaving a guard, Dodd. They'll get you if you try to leave. But they won't eat you. I'm going to have you three sliced into little pieces, the Thousand Deaths of the Chinese. The beetles will eat the parts that are sliced away—and you'll live to watch them. I'll be back with a stick or two of dynamite to-morrow."

"Yeah, but listen, Bram," Dodd sang out. "Listen, you old marsupial tiger. When those pipe dreams clear away, I'm going to build a gallows of beetle-shells reaching to the moon, to hang you on!"

Bram's screech of madness died away. The strident rasping of the beetles' legs began again. For hours the three heard it; it was not until nightfall that it died away.

Bram had made good his threat, for all around the house, extending as far as they could see, was the host of beetle-guards. To venture out, even with their shells about them, was clearly a hazardous

undertaking. There was neither food nor water in the place.

"We'll just have to hold out," said Dodd, breaking one of the long periods of silence.

Tommy did not answer; he did not hear him, for he was busy at the key. Suddenly he leaped to his feet.

"God, Jimmy," he cried, "that devil's making good his threat! The swarm's in South Australia, destroying every living thing, wiping out whole towns and villages! And they—they believe me now!"

He sank into a chair. For the first time the strain of the awful past seemed to grip him. Haidia came to his side.

"The beetles are finish," she said in her soft voice.

"How d'you know, Haidia?" demanded Dodd.

"The beetles are finish," Haidia repeated quietly, and that was all that Dodd could get out of her. But again

the key began to click, and Tommy staggered to the table. Dot—dash—dash—dot. Presently he looked up once more.

"The swarm's halfway to Adelaide," he said. "They want to know if I can help them. Help them!" He burst into hysterical laughter.

Toward evening he came back after an hour at the key. "Line must be broken," he said. "I'm getting nothing."

In the moonlight they could see the huge compound eyes of the beetle guards glittering like enormous diamonds outside. They had not been conscious of thirst during the day, but now, with the coming of the cool night their desire for water became paramount.

"Tommy, there must be water in the station," said Dodd. "I'm going to get a pitcher from the kitchen and risk it, Tommy. Take care of Haidia if—" he added.

But Haidia laid her hand upon his arm. "Do not go, Jimmydodd," she said. "We can be thirsty to-night,

and to-morrow the beetles will be finish."

"How d'you know?" asked Dodd again. But now he realized that Haidia had never learned the significance of an interrogation. She only repeated her statement, and again the two men had to remain content.

The long night passed. Outside the many facets of the beetle eyes. Inside the two men, desperate with anxiety, not for themselves, but for the fate of the world, snatching a few moments' sleep from time to time, then looking up to see those glaring eyes from the silent watchers.

Then dawn came stealing over the desert, and the two shook themselves free from sleep. And now the eyes were gone.

But there was immense activity among the beetles. They were scurrying to and fro, and, as they watched, Dodd and Tommy began to see some significance in their movements.

"Why, they're digging trenches!" Tommy shouted.
"That's horrible, Jimmy! Are they intending to conduct sapping operations against us like engineers, or what?"

Dodd did not reply, and Tommy hardly expected any answer. As the two men, now joined by Haidia, watched, they saw that the beetles were actually digging themselves into the sand.

Within the space of an hour, by the time the first shafts of sunlight began to stream into the room, there was to be seen only the massive, rounded shells of the monsters as they squatted in the sand.

"Now you may fetch water," said Haidia, smiling at her lover. "No, you do not need the shells," she added. "The beetles are finish. It is as the wise men of my people told me."

Wondering, hesitating, Tommy and Dodd unlocked the front door. They stood upon the threshold ready to bolt back again. But there was no stirring among the beetle hosts.

Growing bolder, they advanced a few steps; then, shamed by Haidia's courage, they followed her, still cautiously to the station.

Dodd shouted as he saw a water-tank, and a receptacle above it with a water-cock. They let Haidia drink, then followed suit, and for a few moments, as they appeased their thirst, the beetles were forgotten.

Then they turned back. There had been no movement in that line of shells that glinted in the morning sunlight.

"Come, I shall show you," said Haidia confidently, advancing toward the trench.

Dodd would have stopped her, but the girl moved forward quickly, eluded him with a graceful, mirthful gesture, and stooped down over the trench.

She rose up, raising in her arms an empty beetle-shell!

Dodd, who had reached the trench before Tommy,

turned round and yelled to him excitedly. Tommy ran forward—and then he understood.

The shells were empty. The swarm, whose life cycle Bram had admitted he did not understand, had just moulted!

It had moulted because the bodies, gorged with food, had grown too large for the shells. In time, if left alone, the monsters would grow larger shells, become invincible again. But just now they were defenseless as new-born babes—and knew it.

Deep underneath the empty shells they had burrowed into the ground. Everywhere at the bottom of the deep trenches were the naked, bestial creatures, waving helpless tentacles and squirming over one another as they strove to find shelter and security.

A sudden madness came over Tommy and Dodd.
"Dynamite—there must be dynamite!" Dodd shouted, as he ran back to the station.

"Something better than dynamite," shouted Tommy,

holding up one of a score of drums of petrol!

Chapter 11: The World Set Free

They waited two days at Settler's Station. To push along the line into the desert would have been useless, and both men were convinced that an airplane would arrive for them. But it was not until the second afternoon that the aviator arrived, half-dead with thirst and fatigue, and almost incoherent.

His was the last plane on the Australian continent. He brought the news of the destruction of Adelaide, and of the siege of Melbourne and Sydney, as he termed it. He told Dodd and Tommy that the two cities had been surrounded with trenches and barbed wire. Machine guns and artillery were bombarding the trenches in which the beetles had taken shelter.

"Has any one been out on reconnaissance?" asked Tommy.

Nobody had been permitted to pass through the barbed wire, though there had been volunteers. It

meant certain death. But, unless the beetles were sapping deep in the ground, what their purpose was, nobody knew.

Tommy and Dodd led him to the piles of smoking, stinking débris and told him.

That was where the aviator fainted from sheer relief.

"The Commonwealth wants you to take supreme command against the beetles," he told Tommy, when he had recovered. "I'm to bring you back. Not that they expect me back. But—God, what a piece of news! Forgive my swearing—I used to be a parson. Still am, for the matter of that."

"How are you going to bring us three back in your plane?" asked Tommy.

"I shall stay here with Jimmydodd," said Haidia suavely. "There is not the least danger any more. You must destroy the beetles before their shells have grown again, that's all."

"Used to be a parson, you say? Still are?" shouted Dodd excitedly. "Thank God! I mean, I'm glad to hear it. Come inside, and come quick. I want you too, Tommy!"

Then Tommy understood. And it seemed as if Haidia understood, by some instinct that belongs exclusively to women, for her cheeks were flushed as she turned and smiled into Dodd's eyes.

Ten minutes later Tommy hopped into the biplane, leaving the happy married couple at Settler's Station. His eyes grew misty as the plane took the air, and he saw them waving to him from the ground. Dodd and Haidia and he had been through so many adventures, and had reached safety. He must not fail.

He did not fail. He found himself at Sydney in command of thirty thousand men, all enthusiastic for the fight for the human race, soldiers and volunteers ready to fight until they dropped. When the news of the situation was made public, an immense wave of hope ran through the world.

National differences were forgotten, color and creed and race grew more tolerant of one another. A new day had dawned—the day of humanity's true liberation.

Tommy's first act was to call out the fire companies and have the beetles' trenches saturated with petrol from the fire hoses. Then incendiary bullets, shot from guns from a safe distance, quickly converted them into blazing infernos.

But even so only a tithe of the beetle army had been destroyed. Two hundred planes had already been rushed from New Zealand, and their aviators went up and scoured the country far and wide. Everywhere they found trenches, and, where the soil was stony, millions of the beetles clustered helplessly beneath great mounds of discarded shells.

An army of black trackers had been brought in planes from all parts of the country, and they searched out the beetle masses everywhere along the course that the invaders had taken. Then incendiary bombs were dropped from above.

Day after day the beetle massacre went on. By the end of a week the survivors of the invasion began to take heart again. It was certain that the greater portion of the horde had been destroyed.

There was only one thing lacking. No trace of Bram had been seen since his appearance at the head of his beetle army in front of Broken Hill. And louder and more insistent grew the world clamor that he should be found, and put to death in some way more horrible than any yet devised.

The ingenuity of a million minds worked upon this problem. Newspapers all over the world offered prizes for the most suitable form of death. Ingenious Oriental tortures were rediscovered.

The only thing lacking was Bram.

A spy craze ran through Australia. Five hundred Brams were found, and all of them were in imminent danger of death before they were able to prove an alias.

And, oddly enough, it was Tommy and Dodd who found Bram. For Dodd had been brought back east, together with his bride, and given an important command in the Army of Extermination.

Dodd had joined Tommy not far from Broken Hill, where a swarm of a hundred thousand beetles had been found in a little known valley. The monsters had begun to grow new shells, and the news had excited a fresh wave of apprehension. The airplanes had concentrated for an attack upon them, and Tommy and Dodd were riding together, Tommy at the controls, and Dodd observing.

Dodd called through the tube to Tommy, and indicated a mass that was moving through the scrub—some fifty thousand beetles, executing short hops and evidently regaining some vitality. Tommy nodded.

He signalled, and the fleet of planes circled around and began to drop their incendiary bombs. Within a few minutes the beetles were ringed with a wall of fire. Presently the whole terrain was a blazing furnace.

Hours later, when the fires had died away, Tommy and Dodd went down to look at the destruction that had been wrought. The scene was horrible. Great masses of charred flesh and shell were piled up everywhere.

"I guess that's been a pretty thorough job," said Tommy. "Let's get back, Jim."

"What's that?" cried Dodd, pointing. Then, "My God, Tommy, it's one of our men!"

It was a man, but it was not one of their men, that creeping, maimed, half-cinder and half-human thing that was trying to crawl into the hollow of a rock. It was Bram, and recognition was mutual.

Bram drooping, moaning; he was only the shell of a man, and it was incredible how he had managed to survive that ordeal of fire. The remainder of his life, which only his indomitable will had held in that shattered body, was evidently a matter of minutes, but he looked up at Dodd and laughed.

"So—you're—here, damn you!" he snarled. "And—you

think—you've won. I've—another card—another invasion of the world—beside which this is child's play. It's an invasion—"

Bram was going, but he pulled himself together with a supreme effort.

"Invasion by—new species of—monotremes," he croaked. "Deep down in—earth. Was saving to—prove you the liar you are. Monotremes—egg-laying platypus big as an elephant—existent long before pleistocene epoch—make you recant, you lying fool!"

Bram died, an outburst of bitter laughter on his lips. Dodd stood silent for a while; then reverently he removed his hat.

"He was a madman and a devil, but he had the potentialities of a god, Tommy," he said.